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(Dis)arming the Middle Ages:
Chivalric Materiality in Medieval Romance

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

by

Schuyler Ejay Eastin

September 2017

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To Jane Bukaty who taught me to read,
to Denise Eastin who first opened the wardrobe door,
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

(Dis)arming the Middle Ages:
Chivalric Materiality in Medieval Romance

by

Schuyler Ejay Eastin

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate program in English
University of California, Riverside, September 2017
Dr. Andrea Denny-Brown, Chairperson

This dissertation studies the imagery of armor and its materiality in medieval romance, and in so doing maps the early history of one of our culture's most powerful and sustaining cultural conceits. In medieval romance, armor is used to structure narrative; it is used to create formal aesthetic effects; it is even used as a kind of literary character, outperforming—outshining—even the beautiful maiden as the focus of the knightly quest. While scholars have studied medieval armor from a variety of perspectives, notably its metallurgy and as a manifestation of gendered identity, armor's effectiveness as a literary apparatus has yet to receive a thorough treatment. This project attempts to mediate two heretofore-unconnected critical conversations. The first concerns established theories of gender and fashion that have already thoroughly explored the role of clothing and fashion in crafting identity. I relate these treatments of the performative and material identity of medieval chivalry to the specific material realities of knighthood. This approach incorporates historical and archaeological studies of medieval metallurgy into literary readings influenced by Thing Theory. The overabundance of armor in

medieval narrative, I argue, articulates the medieval knight as an *assemblage*, an object that attains its most significant meaning only when it has been combined with all of the elements that make it whole. This wholeness, moreover, is, only temporary since the violent labor of knightly combat often leads to the destruction, disintegration, or *disassemblage* of the chivalric body and its armor. The fact that this state of disassemblage can be repaired, rescripted and repeated presents a fascinating material modularity to medieval chivalric identity. My work also participates in a vein of materialist studies seeking to bridge a gap between a new critical interest in manuscript materiality and established scholarship in early modern material culture.

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Introduction

The medieval knight is one of the most potent and recognizable symbols of medieval culture, due in part to the persistent popularity of characters like Lancelot and King Arthur. Even in 2017 Hollywood continues to trade on medieval characters and imagery with the recent release of Guy Ritchie's *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* and Michael Bay's *Transformers: Last Knight*. From Sir Gawain to Iron Man, modern cultural consciousness has been saturated with images of armored heroes imbued with ideals of heroism, moral certitude, and social cohesion. This study seeks to examine just how much our understanding of the knight is lodged not with the man beneath the shining armor but in the armor itself. Within the romance genre, the medieval knight is lauded as the highest example of social, romantic, and martial manhood, setting forth to strike down the enemies of his king and to aid fair maidens in peril, all the while covered head-to-toe in metal. This description is admittedly hyperbolic; the historic realities of medieval knighthood are far more violent, morally ambiguous, and entrenched in the politics of the times. The fact remains that an exaggerated image of the knight has descended into modern cultural consciousness from the popular medieval romance, the genre of literature largely responsible for immortalizing knighthood. This study explores a critical space between readings of performative identity and material culture in order to understand the ways that literary representations of chivalric armor structure narrative, articulate the linkage between social classes, interact with book materiality, and most importantly establish a foundational framework for the medieval romance genre. My

overarching argument is that this meaning has largely been forged into and by the hard materials of chivalric identity. Armor completely covers the knight's body, and in doing so it becomes a canvas onto which cultural ideals are projected. This is not to say that armor is in any way a passive medium. In fact, armor interacts with the knight and shapes his ability to perform the various deeds that populate his chivalric résumé. I term these interactions between armor, knighthood, and literature *armorial discourses*. My examination of armorial discourses shares a great deal in common with studies of medieval clothing. Scholars like Susan Crane, E. Jane Burns, Monica Leigh Wright, and Andrea Denny-Brown have made valuable contributions to studies of fashion, textile, and accoutrement in the Middle Ages, but few studies to date have focused specifically on the metallurgical contributions to medieval chivalric identity.¹ By drawing upon principles of identity, assemblage, and embodiment I examine metal armor's role in crafting the chivalric body and the narratives that contain it.

The primary texts of this study are a small canon of French and English vernacular texts that exemplify the medieval romance genre. Romance shares a great deal in common with the medieval chronicle in its celebration of warfare and the exploits of kings. King Arthur himself, also a dominant figure in later medieval romances, was first

¹ I refer to Crane's *The Performance of the Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years' War* (2002), Burns' *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture* (2002), Wright's *Weaving Narrative: Clothing in Twelfth-century French Romance* (2009), and Denny-Brown's *Fashioning Change: The Trope of Clothing in High- and Late-Medieval England* (2012), each of which I consider seminal contributions to scholarship on medieval fashion and identity.

depicted in Geoffrey of Monmouth's early twelfth-century Latin chronicle *Historia Regum Britanniae*.² Unlike the chronicles, however, romances are far less concerned with the progression of historical events and the rise and fall of empires, focusing instead on the heroic exploits of individual heroes. This narrow focus also allows the writers of romance to experiment with narrative structures that were not bound to chronological linearity. Chrétien de Troyes, arguably the single most influential medieval romancer is also notable for initiating the technique of narrative interlacing in which one character could disappear from the narrative only to appear later.³ Romances were also distinct for their accessibility. Most French and English romances were written in the vernacular, making them accessible to a wider audience than many of the Latin chronicles and spiritual literature of the Middle Ages. The romance genre blossomed in the centuries following Chrétien de Troyes' foundational romances, producing a variety of Arthurian narratives such as the anonymous Old French continuations of Chrétien's *Le Conte du Graal*, the Old French *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, and even Wolfram von Eschenbach's thirteenth-century German *Parzival*. Romance narratives also blossomed independently of Arthurian traditions. The Anglo-Norman Insular Romances of the late-twelfth-century created a common heroic folklore between France and England with characters like Horn,

² Geraldine Heng credits Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia* with initiating the literary pattern that became medieval romance: *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 2.

³ Eugène Vinaver insists that this technique did not indicate a lack of narrative control in medieval romancers but rather the construction of an elaborate narrative tapestry: *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 69-70.

Havelok, Guy of Warwick, and Beves of Hampton. Subsequent centuries saw the proliferation and popularization of these both Arthurian and non-Arthurian romance narratives in Middle English. Romance was even popular enough in the fourteenth and fifteenth-centuries to have been lampooned by Geoffrey Chaucer and effectively eulogized by Thomas Malory. Throughout this history the single most defining attribute of the romance genre is its focus upon the singular, heroic chivalric subject.

Much of the cultural capital carried by the medieval knight is lodged in the cultural ideal the knight represents, a code of conduct commonly called chivalry. In his seminal work on the topic, Maurice Keen defines chivalry as “an ethos in which martial, aristocratic and Christian elements were fused together.”⁴ According to Keen, chivalry began with early-medieval military horsemanship and only later incorporated elements of courtly love and religious piety. My own study focuses on the martial aspects of romance knighthood and the ways in which a chivalric subject prepares for and engages in violent conflict. This aspect of chivalric identity is inherently physical, making the materially-armored body of the medieval knight the central image of my study. This chivalric subject embodies a fictionalized amalgamation of material, physical, gendered, symbolic, and textual elements of meaning whenever he rescues a maiden, seeks out the Holy Grail, and especially when he engages another knight in combat; each of these hallmarks of chivalric performance are almost always performed when the knight is fully encased in armor.

⁴ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 16.

Armor is no passive object; it is a text as legible as the narratives in which the knight appears. As Carolyn Springer observes, “These works are indeed texts to be read: overdetermined objects traversed by multiple formal and figurative codes. Armour is always embedded in culture; it is inscribed with markers of political and social identity.”⁵

Armor mimics the body it covers but also shapes it, contouring the chivalric silhouette, subjecting the knight’s appearance according to armor’s material composition.

The result is a representation of the chivalric ideal that was intertwined with its material elements. As Jeremy Citrome observes concerning the fourteenth-century knight

Geoffroi de Charny’s conception of armor, “There is no spatial distinction made here between the organic and the

constructed; the two are conflated in a way that emphasizes their interdependence in the maintenance of chivalric identity.”⁶ Armor was not merely a covering for the chivalric body, it *was* the knight; he operated not in spite of it but because of it. Only in his armor was a knight whole.

Reading medieval armorial discourses necessarily begins with an historical understanding of the ways armor was made, worn, used, and destroyed. Armor bore a



Figure 1: a mail-clad knight in the Westminster Psalter

⁵ Carolyn Springer, *Armour and Masculinity in the Italian Renaissance*, (Toronto, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 3.

⁶Jeremy J. Citrome, "Bodies that Splatter: surgery, chivalry and the Body in the *Practica* of John Arderne" (*Exemplaria* 13.1: 2001), 161.

consistently high symbolic importance throughout the Middle Ages but it can be read in different ways depending on its design and composition. To this end, my study

incorporates close examinations of contemporary armorial technologies and considers the various effects technological advances in metallurgy and production practices have on chivalric representation. As armorial technology developed beyond mail and into plate armor the ways in which knights interacted with their own armor and



Figure 2: Sir Geoffrey Luttrell wearing early plate armor in the Luttrell Psalter

other armored bodies changed significantly. To illustrate this point, we can consider the chivalric images we see in the early thirteenth century Westminster Psalter (Figure 1), the fourteenth-century Luttrell Psalter (Figure 2), and William Caxton's fifteenth-century printing of Jacobus de Cessolis *The Game of Chess* (Figure 3) as representing a very general evolution of armorial technology.⁷ While it was common for medieval writers and artists to depict armor anachronistically, these examples offer fairly faithful representations of contemporary chivalric technology. As the mail armor prevalent in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was slowly overtaken by plate armor in the fourteenth

⁷ Westminster Psalter (British Library Royal 2 A XXII, <<http://www.bl.uk/>>), f 220^r. Luttrell Psalter (British Library Add. MS 42130, <<http://www.bl.uk/>>), f 202^v; Jacobus de Cessolis. *The holy apostle and doctor of the peple saynt Poule sayth in his epistle. Alle that is wryten vnto our doctrine and for our lernyng*, (Westminster: William Caxton, 1483), C4^v. STC 4921. Also known as: *The Playe and the Game of the Chesse*. This image is my photograph of the 1976 facsimile by The Scolar Press, respectively.

and fifteenth-centuries, the contours of the chivalric body changed noticeably; the chivalric body became less uniform and fluid and more segmented and stiff. Most (though certainly not all) medieval romancers had a keen understanding of contemporary armor's form and function and the very representation of knighthood in chivalric literature evolved as well. These changes also meant that the identity of the knight evolved right along with his armor. At its core, medieval



Figure 3: The Knight from Caxton's *Chesse*

chivalry was a martial institution and as such the performance of violence is central to chivalric identity. As Leo Braudy observes, "it is preeminently in war that men make themselves men in the eyes of other men and in their own."⁸ In this sense, the identity of the chivalric subject is inherently gendered and performative. The knight's ability to embody chivalric masculinity is tied to his execution of chivalric duties, most of which required him to inflict damage on other chivalric bodies. Armor is designed specifically to prevent this damage.

My overall argument is premised upon the essential correspondences between the material realities of armor and the ways in which these realities shape both the depiction of armor as well as the shape of the romance narratives in which they appear. As Sarah

⁸ Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 56.

Kay suggests, the bodies depicted in the leaves of a manuscript bear a close resemblance to the bodies used to make those manuscripts in the way they are prepared and even damaged by cutting tools.⁹ In this way the “matter” of the medieval chivalric body is at once armorial, corporeal, and textual. The various assemblages and disassemblages of this chivalric body form the subjects of this study.

The governing theoretical principle for this study is the concept of assemblage. As Citrome mentions above, the knight did not simply wear or use armor, he became it. This becoming required that the discreet components of the chivalric subject be physically joined through an arming act. In their two-part work *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari characterize our modern understanding of wholeness, asserting that:

We no longer believe in the dull gray outlines of a dreary, colorless dialectic of evolution, aimed at forming a harmonious whole out of heterogeneous bits by rounding off their rough edges. We believe only in totalities that are peripheral. And if we discover such a totality alongside various separate parts, it is a whole *of* these particular parts but does not totalize them; it is a unity *of* all of these particular parts but does not unify them; rather, it is added to them as a new part fabricated separately.¹⁰

In this sense, wholeness is not a state of undamaged pristineness but a state that is realized through the connections between smaller components that form a larger

⁹ Sarah Kay, “Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and Other Works” (*Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36.1: 2006), 36.

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Robert Harley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane trans. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 42.

assemblage. This wholeness is inherently fraught and vulnerable to disassembly but also capable of reassembly. The chivalric body is just such an assemblage as are the texts in which this body is bound.

My first chapter, entitled “Mail Armor and Chivalric Disassemblage in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes” examines the ways Chrétien’s knights rhythmically oscillate between states of corporeal armament and disarmament. This argument is, in part, a response to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s suggestion that chivalric bodies, by depending on their equipment to perform chivalric identity, exist in a state of “eruptive becoming.”¹¹ By examining Chrétien’s depiction of contemporary mail armor and the manner and frequency with which knights arm and disarm, I assert that, rather than the monodirectional “becoming” Cohen proposes, the chivalric subject is also inherently understood in relation to his *disassemblage*. The mail armor most common to twelfth-century knights was flexible, mimicked the contours of the chivalric body, and was relatively easy to don and remove. Chrétien’s understanding of chivalric performance accordingly reflects a cyclical engagement and disengagement with armor. I apply this model of armorial discourse most extensively to *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, a text I consider foundational to medieval armorial discourses. Since Chrétien de Troyes represents one of the earliest and most influential iterations of the romance genre,

¹¹ Cohen understands the knight to be “caught in a process of eruptive becoming” realized through his connection to his equipment, namely, his horse: “The Inhuman Circuit” (*Thinking the Limits of the Body*. Eds. Gail Weiss and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003) 167. Cohen further develops this reading of chivalry in his book *Medieval Identity Machines* (2003).

Chapter One also establishes an historical starting point for progressive examinations of armorial discourses.

Chapter Two, “Productive Labor and Armorial discourses in the Gawain Romances,” addresses the effects of the technological shift from mail armor to plate on the narrative representation of knighthood in a microcategory of romances that focus on Sir Gawain. While the plate armor that developed in the thirteenth century offered the knight significantly more protection than earlier mail armor, arming in plate was also a significantly more involved process that fetishized both its materiality and its construction. I examine two highly contrasting examples of plate armor as they are depicted in *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* and the critically-celebrated *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In the case of *Gologras*, armor’s materiality is not only essential to chivalric performance but its depiction reflects the practical effectiveness of plate armor in the heat of battle. This effectiveness is not merely an indication of the poet’s understanding of real-world chivalric imagery but of his engagement with the methods of crafting armor. This depiction serves to emphasize the value of materiality in the armorial discourse in *Gologras* and to incorporate representations of artisanal classes into a narrative genre typically targeted toward a noble audience. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* offers a contrasting deployment of armorial discourse that critiques chivalric performance through its depiction of armorial redundancy. While in *Gologras* armor matters because it is useful, in *Sir Gawain* armor’s material signification is overdetermined, rendering those components useless. In this way, *Sir Gawain* uses armorial discourses to critique the romance genre rather than exemplify it.

My third chapter, “Redundancy, Stability, and the Chivalric Corpus in/of the Auchinleck Manuscript” applies the principles of chivalric materiality established in the previous two chapters to the material realities of a romance-heavy manuscript miscellany. The Auchinleck Manuscript is one of the most important and extensive miscellaneous collections of Middle English romances and as such offers numerous iterations of armorial discourses at work. The most notable of these is what I refer to as the *Guy of Warwick* triptych, a group of three romances written separately but compiled together to form a textual chivalric whole. The romancers of the *Guy* triptych regularly use the Middle English word “carfed” [carved] to describe the ways in which armor is damaged during combat. Similarly, Auchinleck itself has been subject to a significant amount of damage and excision by the hands of biblioclasts. This damage, I argue, so closely resembles the damage done to armor in the Auchinleck romances that the dual materialities of chivalric armor and manuscript materiality can be read in parallel.

My fourth chapter, “The ‘Brastyng’ of Armorial Discourse in Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*,” examines a seminal chivalric text that illustrates the disintegration of medieval armorial discourses. This chapter maps two moments in the literary and critical history of Thomas Malory’s famous compilation of Arthurian lore. The first half of my argument examines Malory’s depiction of armor against the early development of gunpowder warfare toward the end of the Wars of the Roses. Despite the romance genre’s established tradition of corporeal and armorial wholeness, Malory’s knights have a habit of constantly disassembling. This occurs either because armor itself is figured as more of a hindrance than an aid to chivalric performance or because armor offers practically

negligible resistance to the multitude of lance thrusts and sword blows that populate Malory's battlefields with heaps of damaged chivalric bodies. While such depictions seem designed to emphasize the strength and prowess of Malory's knights, the disintegration of chivalric and political bodies in *Le Morte Darthur* is the result of Malory's disengagement with the traditions of romance armorial discourses. The second half of the chapter continues to examine *Le Morte Darthur*'s preoccupation with wholeness by examining a critical and editorial history that has mistakenly attributed Malory with a greater sense of literary assemblage than is his due. This portion of my argument focuses in particular on the ways in which editors from Wynkyn de Worde in 1498, to Eugène Vinaver in 1947, and even Dorsey Armstrong in 2009 have implied that Malory himself conceived of *Le Morte Darthur* as a "whole book." However, since this phrase does *not* appear in William Caxton's 1485 and the pages that would contain it in the famed Winchester Manuscript are lost, I attribute its persistence in later editions and in Malory scholarship to readers' perpetuation of a sense of textual and corporeal wholeness that is inherently informed by medieval armorial discourses.

Scholarly treatments of chivalric performance abound as do studies of medieval fashion and identity, many of which approach the topic from the standpoint of gender.¹² Some studies mention armor in relation to textile or as the medium for medieval heraldry but few have explored the literary effects of armor's materiality. My arguments are

¹² E. Jane Burns' *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading Through Clothes in Medieval French Culture* is an excellent example, though her treatment of armor has more to do with heraldry than metal.

primarily concerned with reopening critical discussions of genre informed by current trends in gender and material studies. These discussions of romance armorial discourses also bear greater implications for reconsidering our cultural conceptions of the formation, maintenance, and performance of heroic identities.

Chapter 1

“Armé et desarmé asanblent”: Mail Armor and Chivalric Disassemblage in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes

In his article “The Inhuman Circuit,” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen identifies the medieval chivalric body as existing in a constant state of “eruptive becoming,” a process that is facilitated “through the loving dispersal of selfhood across and into the body of a horse.”¹ Cohen’s analysis is concerned not with any agency of the horse as an individual but rather its role as part of the assembled whole that represents medieval chivalric masculinity. In essence, the horse is equipment, and the basic process of binding the bodies of horse and rider through the technology of stirrups and armor is fundamental to Cohen’s understanding of the chivalric body as an assemblage in a constant state of eruptive becoming.² Cohen describes this becoming as a perpetual process of approaching but never reaching a fully-assembled identity; the eruptive becoming of the chivalric body perpetual. While Cohen’s understanding of assemblage is foundational to my own, I find the implication of linearity in Cohen’s conception of “eruptive becoming” limiting. On a practical level, the persistence of this becoming has a great deal to do with

¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “The Inhuman Circuit,” *Thinking the Limits of the Body* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 168. This article is the basis for Cohen’s second chapter in *Medieval Identity Machines* entitled “Chevalerie,” also quoted here.

² Cohen makes particular note of the saddle and stirrups as the inanimate objects that most effectively mediate the chivalric assemblage. *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 50, 76.

the cyclical movement of the body in and out of contact with the elements that create the assembled whole; the medieval knight is constantly arming and disarming and by doing so constantly reiterates the conditions for assembled signification—but not necessarily in a single direction. In contrast to Cohen, I would posit that the frequency with which the knight arms and disarms instead situates the chivalric body in a constant state of “oscillatory becoming”; it becomes and unbecomes in a perpetual rhythm. This process is repeated so frequently in the work of influential twelfth-century writer Chrétien de Troyes that it represents a significant system of armorial discourse that structures his literary narratives and establishes armor as a baseline element of the romance genre in the Middle Ages.

In this chapter, I examine the transitional moments of arming and disarming in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes as structural markers that focus these narratives around the assembled body of their primary chivalric subjects. I begin by developing both historical and theoretical models for understanding armor and its ability to assemble the chivalric body. I then apply these principles to Chrétien’s body of work in general before focusing these principles more specifically on *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, which I consider the most exemplary and prototypical of Chrétien’s romances with regard to armor. I hope to demonstrate that, beyond the basic protective function of arms and armor, the chivalric subject’s oscillatory relationship with armor in moments of arming and disarming represent both a structuring principle to chivalric narrative and a core element of the romance tradition initiated by Chrétien de Troyes.

Twelfth-century Mail and Chivalric Wholeness

The argument that follows attempts to forge a connection between the contemporary realities of medieval armorial technologies and the romance narratives that are informed by these realities. Accordingly, it is important to establish a clear sense of the interplay between metallurgy and narrative than currently exists in the scholarship. Most readings of armor in relation to romance narratives focus on the later development of plate armor. Mail, sometimes referred to as “chain mail,” was the military technology *du jour* in Chrétien de Troyes’ twelfth century. As a material object, mail is distinct in its uniformity of surface and the relative ease with which it could be donned and removed.

From the outside in, the full chivalric accoutrement of the twelfth-century knight would usually have included a mail coat known as a hauberk, a helmet or great-helm, and a padded undergarment known as a gambeson or aketon.³ This gambeson was made from padded or quilted cotton or linen cloth that closely fitted the wearer’s body and included a number of hanging laces known as “arming points” that secured the mail to the undergarment, effectively binding the armor to the knight’s body.⁴ A mail hauberk covered most if not all of the knight’s upper body except for the face, which would be covered by a great helm and/or a mail ventail, a flap of mail that guarded the face and

³ Mail had been in use for many hundreds of years prior to Chrétien’s writing but would not be replaced until a combination of forging technology, market demand, and the rise of projectile weaponry would urge the innovation of plate-armor: Alan Williams, “The Blast Furnace and the Mass Production of Armour Plate” (*History of Technology* 16: 1994), 100.

⁴ Charles ffoulkes, *The Armorer and His Craft: From the XIth to the XVIth Century* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1988), 108.

was often tied around the mouth, leaving an opening for the eyes only. The mail itself was made up of thousands of interlinked rings of steel or iron wire that were painstakingly linked and riveted together into a larger garment.⁵ The wire itself was made by pulling bars of hot metal through smaller and smaller holes in a larger plate before being wound around a small cylindrical bar and cut into individual rings. These rings were then woven into other rings and riveted closed (in different patterns depending on the expense of the suit) until the larger garment took shape.⁶ The construction of mail, therefore, relied on and was inherently associated with processes of binding or securing, as it consisted of an almost textile-like weaving of steel links that create a mimetic layer over every surface of the knight's body.

Though few contemporary twelfth-century hauberks or gambesons have survived, scholars assume, based on later models, that their shape and construction were governed by patterns comparable to those used by a tailor.⁷ Accordingly, we can understand the signification of armor in similar terms to that of clothing and textile. In his analysis of an arming scene in Chrétien de Troyes' *Erec and Enide*, Helmut Nickel remarks that the arming process for Chrétien's mail-clad knights would not have looked entirely dissimilar to slipping on a sweater. In this scene Enide helps Erec arm beginning with the separate "chaucés" or mail leggings, followed by the "hauberc" (shirt) with an attached

⁵ Matthias Pfaffenbichler, *Medieval Craftsmen: Armourers* (Buffalo: British Museum Press, 1992), 56-7. Williams, *The Knight and the Blast Furnace*, 29-30.

⁶ Pfaffenbichler, *Medieval Craftsmen*, 56-7.

⁷ Pfaffenbichler, *Medieval Craftsmen*, 59.

“coif” (hood-like head covering), and the “aventail” (face-flap), all of which are secured by leather straps before the final addition of the “heaume” or helmet.⁸ We can therefore assume that whenever Chrétien refers to an arming act, he imagines something very similar to the aforementioned scene in *Erec et Enide*. Arming this way was relatively simple and far less involved than it became with the introduction of plate armor, which often required a cadre of squires and artisans to help the knight wear and maintain his equipment.⁹ In contrast, the mail-clad knight was capable of a significant degree of independence in contrast to his chivalric descendants.

Many twelfth century illuminations depict knights in helmets and full-body suits of armor, often with the mail extending all the way to the knight’s hands and feet, following the contours of the knight’s body. This is another important distinction from plate armor, which tended to significantly modify or reshape the body.¹⁰ When armored and unarmored characters are depicted together in MS Garrett 125, there is no discernible difference in body size. In fact, the calves and arms of the armored



Figure 4: Meleagant delivering his initial challenge at Arthur’s court.

⁸ Chrétien de Troyes, *Erec and Enide*, 709-726. Quoted in: Nickel, “Arthurian Armings,” 6. These terms are fairly standardized throughout Chrétien’s work.

⁹ Nickel considers *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to represent a transitional period between the use of mail and plate armor. Nickel, “Arthurian Armings,” 11.

¹⁰ Susan Crane notes a similar development in clothing and one that is also influenced by changes in both fashion and technology: *Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 13.

figures are far more defined than those of their heavily-robed counterparts, almost as if the armor has become enmeshed within the contours and proportions of the chivalric body (see Figure 4).¹¹ In this sense, mail armor is distinct from the later armor that has received a disproportionate amount of critical attention. Mail occupies a liminal space between the close corporeality of clothing and the defensive effectiveness of plate armor.

Unworn, mail armor is as formless and flat as unworn clothing. The body of the arming knight fills the contours of the hauberk just as the hauberk contains the potentially leaky body. When worn, both materials mimic each other and thus meld into one in a way that contemporary artistic depictions capture effectively. For example, the famous

Morgan Picture Bible imagines a biblical scene with distinctly medieval imagery as David disarms while Saul looks on (Figure 5).¹² Like David's armor here, mail unoccupied by a chivalric body falls to the ground limp and formless. When worn, on the other hand, mail operates much like a second skin, as seen in Saul's well-defined



Figure 5: David disarming in the thirteenth-century Morgan Picture Bible.

¹¹ Princeton, NJ, Garrett MS 125, 34^r. See also: 31^v and 32^r. Both of these examples depict scenes from *Le chevalerie de Judas Macchabée*. Despite the contents of its text, the illuminations of Garrett MS 125 only infrequently portray scenes from *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*. The illumination on 56v (not pictured) contains an interesting exception to my understanding of body proportions since it depicts an armored Yvain fighting an unarmored giant.

¹² Helmut Nickel, "Arthurian Arming for War and for Love," 7. Figure 1: *Morgan Bible*. The Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. MS M. 638. (28^r).

forearms and calves. In this way, mail armor was both attached to and closely associated with the body of the knight and accordingly bore a great deal of the symbolic significance surrounding the medieval chivalric physique.

Chivalric Identity and Dis/Assemblage

For Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, a primary component of the knight's iron-clad identity, at least on the battlefield, was his equipment, specifically his horse. Cohen postulates:

The horse, its rider, the bridle and saddle and armor together form the Deleuzian circuit or assemblage, a network of meaning that decomposes human bodies and intercuts them with the inanimate, the inhuman. No single object or body has meaning within this assemblage without reference to the other forces, intensities, affects, and directions to which it is conjoined and within which it is always in the process of becoming something other, something new.¹³

Cohen here refers to the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which conceives of an assemblage of the organic and inorganic to create a larger whole capable of a highly developed signification that either component is incapable of on its own.¹⁴ For Cohen, the conjuncture of the knight's body and his equipment facilitates this continuous becoming or manifestation of chivalric identity. The parting of these components of assembled knighthood in moments of disarming or, more specifically to Cohen, dismounting,

¹³ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 76.

¹⁴ Deleuze and Guattari define the assemblage as "every constellation of singularities and traits deducted from the flow—selected, organized, stratified—in such a way as to converge (consistency) artificially and naturally; an assemblage, in this sense, is a veritable invention." *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. Brian Massumi, (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 406.

challenges the efficacy of the assemblage and its ability to contain and signify chivalric masculinity; a knight is not a knight without a horse.

Not every moment of disassembly is optional, however, since knighthood almost always involves violence. As Jeremy J. Citrome has convincingly theorized, much of medieval chivalric identity is focused on defining and maintaining the wholeness of the body, which is particularly difficult for a class whose main function is to shatter the integrity of other chivalric bodies.¹⁵ Citrome focuses specifically on the medieval surgeon's ability to police corporeal boundaries and maintain wholeness. Since armor signifies seamlessness and wholeness, the wounded body, he argues, represents an essential loss of knightly signification; the chivalric body must be whole and sound and without leaks in order to remain symbolically intact.¹⁶ Armor solves this problem by guarding the chivalric body against the kinds of leaks that would interfere with its wholeness. Despite armor's close physical and symbolic connection to the chivalric body, it is inherently less stable than the body it protects. It must be removed at regular intervals when the knight leaves the battlefield, and on the battlefield it absorbs the blows that would normally damage the knight, often disintegrating in the process. If equipment

¹⁵ Jeremy J. Citrome, "Bodies that Splatter: Surgery, Chivalry and the Body in the *Practica* of John Arderne," *Exemplaria* 13 no. 1 (2001), 165. In his later book, Citrome turns his attention more toward the effects of sin and spiritual articulations of corporeal wholeness but his chapter on John Arderne's *Exemplaria* was imported with only a few changes from the original publication: *The Surgeon in Medieval English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁶ Citrome, "Bodies that Splatter," 161. This evaluation is made in reference to a reading of John Neele's 15th Century treatise *Knyghthode and Bataile*.

is as essential to maintaining an intact chivalric identity as both Cohen and Citrome argue, moments of disarmament and disintegration, as necessary as they might be, halt the knight's eruptive becoming and destabilize chivalric identity.

E. Jane Burns makes one such assertion concerning Chrétien's *Le Chevalier de la Carrette*, arguing that the unarmed or undressed knight lacks control over his masculinity. Focusing on the romance's presentation of adorned and unadorned bodies, Burns postulates a fluidity of the knight's gender during transitions between masculine "encasement" and feminine exposure.¹⁷ According to Burns, "what lies beneath the knight's armor in courtly romance [...] is not sexual difference but the sexual ambiguity of a social body that can move quite readily between genders and between social stations."¹⁸ For Burns the chivalric assemblage is inherently coded masculine, which also means that chivalric *disassemblage* introduces instability or indeterminacy by shifting the chivalric body closer to the feminine. These moments of disassemblage do not threaten chivalric becoming as Cohen, Boyarin, and Burns suspect but are, in fact, essential to understanding the medieval chivalric subject. Romance narratives explore a significant middle-ground between assembled and disassembled states of corporeality in the dis/arming of the chivalric subject. Certainly, as Citrome suggests, armor is the primary signifier of chivalric wholeness, but this does not mean that the disarmed knight is

¹⁷ E. Jane Burns, "Refashioning Courtly Love: Lancelot as Ladies' Man or Lady/Man?" *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken, and James A. Schultz eds., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 118.

¹⁸ Burns, "Refashioning Courtly Love," 124.

inherently or irreparably fragmented since neither state is final.¹⁹ In fact, moments of transition between armored and unarmored states represent one of the most consistent structural elements in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes.

Chrétien's knights are bound up in what Monica Wright has called a "clothing signifying system" in which the alternate states of dress and undress are foundational to

the romance knight's identity.²⁰ The knight's movements between armed and disarmed states of being are not random or uncontrolled but rather represent rhythmic, cyclical movements

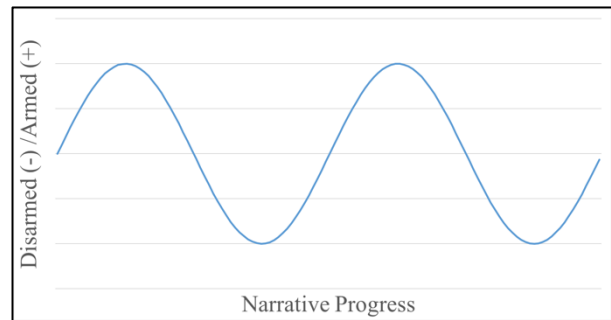


Figure 6: A sine wave

between equally opposing states of corporeal being that maintain stability not through a static or linear progression but, not unlike the oscillatory balance of a sine wave, indicate patterned and measured balance: chivalric identity is stable in its cyclical instability (Figure 6).

The sheer number of Chrétien's armorial costume changes, what Wright calls "clothing acts" and I will call "dis/arming acts," suggest not simply an oscillation

¹⁹ Citrome further suggests an adhesion of armor and body, noting 'There is no spatial distinction made here between the organic and the constructed; the two are conflated in a way that emphasizes their interdependence in the maintenance of chivalric identity.' Citrome, "Bodies that Splatter," 161.

²⁰ Monica Leigh Wright, *Weaving Narrative: Clothing in Twelfth-Century French Romance*, (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009), 125. Wright draws heavily on Norris Lacy's understanding of identity in "On Armor and Identity: Chrétien and Beyond." Also, similar to Burns, Wright considers Lancelot's place in the "vestimentary code" to be indeterminate (142).

between assembled identity and nonidentity but rather a system of reiteration that forms chivalric identity without actually diminishing the importance of the unarmed state. The transition becomes a site of maintenance and education for chivalric identity.²¹ Armor is a medium upon which masculinity is projected; it is the most visible exterior representation of knighthood and the physical limit of the knightly body. As a practical reality this medium must constantly be stripped and reapplied, causing perpetual shifts in signification; when he is armed, his chivalric masculinity is most complete, but when he sheds his equipment or it is forcibly removed, his skin becomes vulnerable and permeable and, as Citrome, Cohen, Boyarin, and Burns all seem to agree, the knight's ability to embody or contain his chivalric identity is called into question. This question is not destructive or destabilizing to armorial discourses, however. In fact, as Chrétien de Troyes' romances will show, *overattachment* to one's armor presents a larger problem to chivalric identity than periodic disassembly. For Chrétien de Troyes and for much of medieval romance by extension, disassemblage does not represent an inherent defect in chivalric identity but a form of armorial dissociation that plays a key role in armorial discourses of Chrétien de Troyes' romances.

Dissociative and Disassembled Armor in Chrétien's Corpus

Dis/arming acts in Chrétien's romances fall into three distinct categories, the first and most basic being the arming act. As discussed above, an arming act establishes the

²¹ As Wright defines them, "Clothing acts are those actions taken by characters to alter the appearance of themselves or others": *Weaving Narrative* 79.

baseline assemblage of the romance knight. Erec only becomes himself when he first acquires his borrowed suit of armor. Similarly, Perceval only feels himself confirmed within the Arthurian political assemblage once he has acquired and donned the Red Knight's armor. Arming acts are described with varying degrees of detail, sometimes involving the full inventory we see in *Erec et Enide* or sometimes with the simple indication that a knight armed before he set out. As the inventories included here indicate (see Appendix), even in these moments of minimal detail Chrétien is remarkably consistent about indicating that an arming act has taken place before his knights set forth from a place of rest. These arming acts serve to reassert the chivalric assemblage in anticipation. The second category of dis/arming acts is a simple reverse of the first. Once combat is over and the chivalric exploits of the day are concluded, Chrétien's knights disarm in a relative state of peace before reentering domestic spaces of rest. This is not always the case: knights sometimes partake in chivalric exploits while unarmed or even disarm in the field if the occasion calls for it. These variations on the peaceful disarming act will be discussed at length below but suffice it to say that this category of dis/arming involves the knight's intentional removal of his armor. Despite the simple binary that arming and disarming suggest, armor is not impervious and is rarely removed in the same condition in which it was first donned. The basic function of armor is to protect the knight's body when it is subjected to the fierce blows of an adversary. The way that armor effects this function is not to create a static, impenetrable shell but to redirect damage away from the fleshy body and onto the metallic one. Chrétien knew this and accordingly offers descriptions of combat that outline the third category of dis/arming

acts: violent disarmings. Chivalric combat represents the zenith of knightly performance while at the same time indicating the material threat such violence poses to the chivalric assemblage: the greater the skill and prowess of the combatants the more their equipment is subject to explosive disintegration. This damage makes disarming not a simple necessity for comfort in spaces of rest but an absolute necessity if the armor is to be repaired or replaced. This form of disarming is simultaneously the greatest challenge to the chivalric wholeness and the most essential evidence for chivalric performance. Thus, Chrétien de Troyes' representation of chivalric signification involves a perpetual cycle of use and maintenance.

Chrétien de Troyes' protagonists arm or disarm between ten to seventeen times in each romance (see Appendix).²² This does not include the arming or disarming of armies or antagonistic knights. In the nearly 37,000 lines of poetry that make up Chrétien's extant corpus of romances, a primary chivalric subject arms or disarms about every 445 lines.²³ Not all of the armings included in this number receive the kind of detail Helmut Nickel notes above concerning *Erec and Enide*. In fact, disarmings are far more frequent than armings, especially when we consider the armorial disintegration that occurs during combat a form of disarming. The motif of dis/arming is represented throughout Chrétien de Troyes' corpus of romances but its presence indicates more than just thematic

²² A detailed inventory of the dis/arming acts in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* appears below. For inventories of the rest of the romances, see Appendix.

²³ Full tally of dis/arming acts: seventeen in *Cligés*, fourteen in *Erec et Enide*, nineteen in *Le Chevalier au Lion*, and twenty-three in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, and sixteen in *Le Conte du Graal*.

consistency. The binarism of arming and disarming constructs a foundational discourse for imagining knighthood in Chrétien's Arthurian world. These romances' various engagements with systems of dis/arming are foundational to their portrayal of chivalric heroism.

In *Erec and Enide*, assumed by scholars to have been written first, armor facilitates the recuperation of its two protagonists' loving relationship.²⁴ An inventory of Erec's dis/arming acts reveals at least ten moments of transition throughout *Erec et Enide* (see Table 1). More than the number of dis/arming acts, the specific suits of armor being dis/armed in each of these moments is central to the romance's engagement with armorial discourses. Erec enters the narrative in a state of precarious disarmament. When the Vile Knight assaults one of the Queen's maids Erec is slow to respond because he lacks the proper equipment. In desperation, Erec appeals to his host, "tant que je so[i]e aparueilliez / D'unes armes, viez ou noveles, / Moi ne chaut quiex, ou leides ou beles" [Advise me how to be supplied / With armor, ugly gear or fair, / Or old or new, I do not care.]²⁵ Erec's lack of armor is figured as a hard barrier to his ability to punish the offending knight. The

²⁴ Stephen Mark Carey, "Chartrian Influence and German Reception: Dating the Works of Chrétien de Troyes," *Arthuriana* 20 no. 3, 21-44.

June Hall McCash, "Reconsidering the Order of Chrétien de Troyes's Romances," *Li premerains vers. Essays in Honor of Keith Busby*, Catherine M. Jones, Logan E Whalen, and Douglas Kelly, eds., (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2011), 245-260. Both scholars cite the general influence of Claude Luttrell's chronology, published in 1974.

²⁵ *Erec et Enide*, Pierre Kuntzmann, transcription. (Paris, BN. Fr. 794). *Analyse et Traitement Informatique de la Langue Francaise*. Ottawa, ON, Canada: Université d'Ottawa, 2009. 608-10. All English translations from: *Erec and Enide*. Ruth Harwood Cline, trans. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000.

armor's quality does not matter, as long as he is wearing a suit to facilitate his chivalric performance. When the host generously opens up his armory, Erec is soon armed by Enide herself, his future wife. This arming act briefly inventories the components of this suit of armor as Enide:

Lace li les *chaucés* de fer
Et queust a corroies de cer,
Haubert li vest de bone maille
Puis si li lace la ventaille;
Le hiaume brun li met ou chief,
Mout l'arme bien de chief en chief.
[She laced his iron *greaves* and tied
The pair with thongs of cut deer hide,
Put on his hauberk of strong mail,
And did the lace of his ventail.
The shining helm on him she put
And armed him well from head to foot.]²⁶

Enide carefully constructs her husband's armored self from the ground up, beginning with his foot and leg armor and ending with his helmet. Chrétien's description of Erec's arming "de chief en chief" indicates the completeness of this assemblage; every outer extremity of Erec's body has been encased, revealing the chivalric wholeness this arming act denotes. Despite the sense of completeness or wholeness this arming act creates, *Erec et Enide* also explores the role of damage and replacement on the development of the chivalric subject. Perhaps an indicator of the haste with which Erec arms, the description

²⁶ *Erec et Enide*, 711-6. Emphases mine: Cline's translation of "chaucés" is historically inaccurate; chaucés are mail leggings while greaves are plate. While greaves in different forms had been used since the Bronze age and on into the late Middle Ages, Chrétien describes a piece of equipment made of mail and *not* the kind of plate shinguard that Cline's translation suggests.

of this arming act indicates only Erec's armorial components, sparing little room for a description of quality beyond the "bone maille" and the "hiaume brun." The suit is strong but basic and Erec departs in haste without belaboring the arming process. This the first of three distinct suits of armor that Erec wears throughout the romance, each of which is described in far more detail than most other suits of armor in Chrétien's romances.

Erec's second suit, armed upon his pensive departure from the domesticity that many of Erec's fellow knights believe has subdued his chivalric masculinity, is described not only in terms of its richness and strength but also its metallurgical composition:

Premieremant se fist haucier
D'unes chaues de blanc acier;
Aprés vest un haubert tant chier
C'on n'en pooit maille tranchier;
Mout estoit riches li haubers
Qui en l'endroit ne en l'envers
N'ot tant de fer con une aguille
Ne il ne pooit coillir ruille
Que toz estoit d'argent faitiz,
De menues mailles traitiz;

[His lower limbs he first had placed
in greaves of shining steel and laced,
then donned a hauberk so high-priced
no link of mail mesh could be sliced.
This hauberk was expensive stuff;
its iron content not enough
to make a needle or to rust
within and out, for it was just
completely silver, shining pale,
of triply woven, tiny mail.]²⁷

²⁷ *Erec et Enide*, 2633-42.

The composition and craft represented by the second suit is far more indicative of Erec's personal preferences. This suit is made not of iron but of steel, indicating a significantly more complicated metallurgical process, more technologically advanced workmanship, and more economically dear. Chrétien's description of the suit as containing less iron than a needle both celebrates this suit and denigrates the previous one. The construction of its links offers a similar depiction of the suit as exceptionally designed. Double-linked mail would have been considered particularly fine in the twelfth century and even later.²⁸ Triply-woven mail borders on the metallurgically impossible, indicating the near-fantastical expense producing such a suit would have involved.²⁹ Moreover, this is Erec's own armor: it is not leant to him by a vavasour, as is the first suit or sent to him by King Arthur, as is the third suit (discussed below). The beauty of the armor and the extended description of its workmanship indicate Erec's overly-wrought inscription of his own identity into his armor. We might accordingly expect such a fine suit of armor to offer the

²⁸ ffoulkes notes that double-linked mail would have been exceptionally rare: *The Armourer and his Craft*, 45. Pfaffenbichler also notes that the armorer would need to leave out rings in specific places in order to complete the shape of the hauberk. Adding another layer of rings would have more than doubled the work. Pfaffenbichler, *Medieval Craftsmen*, 59.

²⁹ Williams notes that riveted mail was slightly easier as the link only needed to be passed through two other links in order to be riveted. However, this practice only became common in 14th century mail; earlier examples of mail (of which there are very few) suggest welding as the primary method for closing links, a process that required each link to pass through three others before closure. This would make triple-woven mail nigh impossible; such a hauberk is only likely to have existed in fiction. Williams, *The Knight and the Blast Furnace*, 30.

best protection, but the ensuing narrative demonstrates that such a suit seemingly designed for show may do more to betray the wearer than protect him.

Structurally, this arming scene stands between the narrative's two most important episodes: the first involves Erec's pursuit of the Sparrow Hawk and the winning of Enide. The second involves Erec's attempt to recapture his chivalric masculinity after his marriage and subsequent domestic bliss had made him the object of criticism by his peers. Contrary to expectations, this attempt to reclaim his latent identity after donning his arguably overdetermined armor is foiled when the equipment itself exacerbates his wounds rather than preventing them. Erec sustains heavy injuries during a battle with the knight Guivret on a drawbridge.³⁰ Rather than rest until fully-healed, Erec stubbornly sets forth again, causing his armor to pull and tear at the unhealed flesh beneath it:

ses armes tant le greverent
Que ses plaies li escreverent
Et totes ses bandes tranchierent;
Onques ses plaies n'estanchierent

[his armor caused him so much pain,
his gashes opened up again,
and all his bandages were split;
they did not staunch his wounds one bit.]³¹

Erec's leaky body evokes Citrome's assessment of chivalric dissolution. And while it is no surprise that any knight would be wounded throughout the course of violent combat,

³⁰ *Erec et Enide*, 3772-3830 (Cline trans. 3763-3814). Note that line numbers are dissimilar. The Old French comes from Paris, BN fr. 1376. Cline uses Paris, BN fr. 794. In previous quotations, the two versions are concurrent.

³¹ *Erec et Enide*, 4585-4588 (Cline trans. 4553-4556).

rarely do we see the armor itself as an instrument of pain to its wearer. Indeed, the expectation is the opposite and Chrétien's description of Erec's initial arming quoted above would suggest a unique durability in combat and painlessness of wear. But the armor fails this expectation to the point of remaining unserviceable for Erec's last sojourn. Despite its costly appearance Erec's armor seems ill-suited for its primary purpose.

Carolyn Springer identifies a similar effect at work in Italian Renaissance armor designed for civic performance. While expressive of a narrative of the wearer's masculinity, the ornamentation and related structural weaknesses of parade armor, "compromised the objects as literal protection, but it greatly enhanced their value as instruments of rhetoric."³² Whereas the practical armor of earlier centuries would not often have allowed for significant ornamentation, when that armor did not actually need to perform on the battlefield, the blacksmith had a great deal more freedom to shape the object and, by extension, the identity of the wearer. In his description of Erec's second suit of armor, Chrétien emphasizes its beauty and workmanship, even suggesting a positive comparison to silver, a costly but wholly impractical metal for armorial components. We might expect that this would be Erec's ideal equipment, that it would protect him the best out of any other incidental suit he might wear. The rhetoric of its materials and construction certainly suggest this but the narrative demonstrates the

³² Carolyn Springer, *Armour and Masculinity in the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 6.

opposite. In fact, the armor's inability to protect Erec facilitates his subsequent reconciliation with Enide.

Erec et Enide contains a third arming scene that contains a comparably minimal level of detail. This suit of armor is provided by King Arthur himself:

Car les soes ierent usees
Et empiries et maumises.
Les armes a volantiers prises,
Si s'en fait armer en la sale

[Erec's own was damaged, used,
in poor condition, and well worn.
Within the hall he armed that morn
with armor he was glad to wear.]³³

As an expression of armorial materiality, this third armor is the humblest of Erec's three suits but just like the previous two it appears at a key point in the overall narrative. Each of these suits corresponds to the romance's three major episodes and thus correspond to three points in Erec's development as a chivalric subject. The material composition of these suits also inherently informs the structural detail of the narrative. The first suit of armor, given to Erec by his soon-to-be father-in-law, is sturdy but unremarkable. His chausses are of iron, a heavier and more brittle metal than the ferrous steel alloys already being used in Chrétien's twelfth century.³⁴ Beyond the chausses, Chrétien does not belabor the details of this particular array. He offers even less detail for Erec's third suit,

³³ *Erec et Enide*, 5680-5683 (Cline trans. 5640-5643)

³⁴ Later refining and quenching methods were capable of producing both iron and steel of significant hardness but the state of metallurgical practice in the twelfth century meant that steel, when it could be produced in sufficient quantities, significantly outperformed iron. Williams, *The Knight and the Blast Furnace*, 894.

mentioning only that it had been sent by Arthur and that, “Les armes a volantiers prises” [armor he was glad to wear.]³⁵ It is in these somewhat subdued armors, however, that Erec is most successful in chivalric performance. After donning the first suit, Erec defeats the Vile Knight and wins the affection of his future wife.³⁶ After donning the third suit, Erec fights and defeats the Tall Knight, leading to the joyous conclusion of the romance. In both of these bookended episodes Erec’s armor is remarkably effective, a sharp contrast to the second suit of armor, which is beautiful but lacks integrity during the portion of the narrative when Erec’s masculinity and marriage are most in question. Thus armor is not merely ornamental or realistic but plays a valuable role in the expression and progression of chivalric identity.

A similar theme of reunification permeates *Le Chevalier au Lion*.³⁷ While on the social level, Yvain spends the better part of the whole narrative attempting to reforge his relationship with his wife, the marital reassemblage is mediated throughout by a series of temporary armorial reassemblages. Yvain is never armed with as much detail as Erec, but he still performs no fewer than sixteen arming acts throughout the narrative (see Table

³⁵ *Erec et Enide*, 5682 (Cline trans. 5642).

³⁶ This is Cline’s name for the romance’s first antagonist.

³⁷ Scholars generally agree that *Le Chevalier au Lion* was composed in close proximity if not contemporaneously with *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*. The poet even shows a striking interest in maintaining intertextual canonicity when he interweaves the narratives in these two romances: McCash, “Reconsidering the Order of Chrétien de Troyes’ Romances,” 245. In fact, Yvain accepts the battle with Harpin of the Mountain because Gawain is off rescuing the queen with Lancelot, the story of which appears in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (*Le Chevalier au Lion* 3511-20). It is also mentioned that the daughter of the Lord of the Black Thorn arrives at Arthur’s court while Lancelot is imprisoned in Meleagant’s tower (*Le Chevalier au Lion* 4517-23).

2).³⁸ While each of Yvain's arming acts offers an image of Yvain's armorial wholeness, this state is never permanent and is almost immediately reduced to disassemblage through chivalric violence. During his first encounter with the Storm Knight:

Le hiaume enbruncherent et ploient
Et des aubers les mailles volent,
Si que de sanc assès se tolent;
Car d'euz meïsmes sont si chaut
Que li lor haubers ne lor vaut
A chascun gueres plus d'un froc.

[Their helmets bent,
and meshes from their hauberks went
through the air, and much blood flowed, since
their bodies' heat was so intense,
their hauberks gave them even less
protection than the knights' cloth dress.]³⁹

Not only is Yvain's hauberk damaged but in an imitation of splattering blood, its individual links are scattered, emphasizing the disintegratory effects of chivalric violence. Chrétien draws particular attention to the material limits of armor in this conflict, comparing it to "un froc" or a coat, an article of clothing that is *not* armor. The comparison to textile both emphasizes the fervor of combat and denigrates the ability of armor to serve its protective function. This is not to say that Yvain is improperly armed,

³⁸ For a full inventory of Yvain's dis/arming acts, see Appendix.

³⁹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Chevalier au Lion ou Le Roman D'Yvain*, David F. Hult ed. (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1994), 840-845. English translations from: Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain, or, The Knight with the Lion*, Ruth Harwood Cline, trans., (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1975), 789-794. Note that line numbers are dissimilar. The Old French comes from Paris, BN fr. 1433. Cline uses Paris, BN fr. 794.

but that combat inherently *dis*-arms the medieval knight, a reality that can only be remedied by repeated *re*-armings.

The most important of these arming acts facilitates Yvain's return to chivalric signification following his madness in the woods. As Norris Lacy argues, this period of madness and nonidentity is made all the more significant by Yvain's nakedness; the loss of chivalric and marital identity is accompanied by a loss of accoutrement.⁴⁰ This period of identificatory indeterminacy seems to be resolved when Yvain comes to his senses and calls for a horse and armor, but this stability is soon foiled when, overcome with grief upon returning to the fountain, Yvain's own fainting body drives his sword through his mail:

Et s'espee, qui fu coulans,
Chiet du fuerre, si li apointe
Ad mailles du hauberc la pointe,
Endroit le col, pres de la joe.
N'i a maille qui'il ne descloie,
Et l'espee du col li trenche
Le char desous la maille blanche,
Tant qu'il en fist du sanc cheoir.

[His sword dropped from the scabbard, split
his hauberk's mail, and cut through it
beside the cheek and the neck.
There is no mesh too strong to wreck,
and so the sharp sword did not fail
to cut the skin beneath the mail
beside the lord Yvain's neck, so

⁴⁰ Lacy, Norris, "On Armor and Identity: Chrétien and Beyond," Norris J. Lacy, "On Armor and Identity: Chrétien and Beyond," *De Sens Rassis*, Keith Busby et al., eds., (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Rodopi, 2005).

it made his blood begin to flow.]⁴¹

Chrétien emphasizes the physical impossibility of any armor to prevent this kind of self-inflicted injury. As we see in *Erec et Enide*, armor can vary in quality and composition but in this case, armor effective against such an injury simply does not exist. Yvain had only just regained his sanity and his armor three hundred lines prior, but his body collapses upon itself and damages the newly donned armor as if to remind the knight of this reassemblage's inherent instability.

A central theme of Chrétien's armorial discourses in *Erec and Enide* and *Le Chevalier au Lion* rests upon a necessary dissociation with chivalric equipment, and both Erec and Yvain appear to learn this lesson handily. In Chrétien's *Cligés*, typically considered Chrétien's second romance, the eponymous knight outstrips his predecessors in his fluency with armorial discourse, handily mobilizing armorial discourse to confirm his chivalric prowess to the Arthurian community.⁴² Both Alexander and his son Cligés arm and disarm regularly, and their combats frequently draw attention to the role not simply of swords, lances, and shields but armor in particular (see Table 3).⁴³ Perhaps unique to this romance, however, is the plurality of Cligés' equipment. Cligés' father Alexander wins a great deal of fame through disguising himself in the armor of his enemies and Cligés himself wears at least two separate suits of armor during the first

⁴¹ *Le Chevalier au Lion*, 3494-3501 (Cline trans. 3303-3311).

⁴² McCash suggests an alternative chronology, putting *Le Chevalier au Lion* and *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* before *Cligés* rather than after. McCash, "Reconsidering the Order of Chrétien's Romances," 260.

⁴³ Collectively, Alexander and Cligés engage in seventeen separate dis/arming acts.

portions of his narrative. Cligés' first suit of armor is never described in detail and he does not explicitly arm in the narrative; we only hear that his enemies' blows cannot rend it.⁴⁴ The second suit, lent to Cligés from the Greek emperor, is all white and includes an unbreakable shield of elephant tusk.⁴⁵ Cligés is not subjected to the armorial disintegrations we see in *Erec et Enide* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*. Both Erec and Yvain seek to repair the damage they themselves have wrought to their marital bonds. Cligés, on the other hand, is more focused on proving his mettle both at home and abroad. In this, armor not only protects his body but protects his identity from an oversaturated chivalric reputation. The two armors mentioned above only initiate Cligés' carousel of five separate suits that allow him to prove his chivalric potency to himself before confirming his reputation publicly.

When Cligés enters the tournament in the latter episodes of the romance his first two suits of armor are laid aside. In an attempt to remain incognito, Cligés sends his squires out to find three new suits of armor, each a different color: red, green, and black.⁴⁶ Keeping their fellows hidden, Cligés wears each of these three suits on three separate days of the tournament: on the first day Cligés defeats Sagremore while wearing the black suit, on the second day he defeats Lancelot while wearing green, on the third

⁴⁴ Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligés*, Charles Méla and Olivier Collet eds. (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1994), 3748. English translations from: Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligés*, Ruth Harwood Cline, trans. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 3756. Note that some line numbers are dissimilar. The Old French comes from Paris, BN fr. 12560. Cline uses Paris, BN fr. 794

⁴⁵ *Cligés*, 3978-3983 (Cline trans. 3983-3990).

⁴⁶ *Cligés*, 4536-4541 (Cline trans. 4552-4556).

day he defeats Perceval while in red, and finally Cligés equals Sir Gawain while wearing his original suit of lily white armor.⁴⁷ The return to this suit suggests its relative importance in comparison to the other four, especially considering its detailed depiction in the climactic combat of the romance:

Les haubers blans et desmailliez,
Et porfanduz et detailliez
Les escuz, et les hiaumes fraiz,
Que parole fust de la paiz.

[Bright mail was torn, the links were cracked,
The shields they bore were pierced and hacked,
Their helms were broken piece by piece
Before there would be talk of peace.]⁴⁸

The doubled end rhyme of these lines places layered emphasis on the disintegration. As with Erec's second suit, such damage would normally call the knight's chivalric identity into question. Cligés, arguably one of the most armorially fluent knights in Chrétien's romances, responds to this four-part disintegration in kind by revealing the shared identities of the white, red, black, and green knights. Cligés comfortably shifts between a kaleidoscope of armorial identities without challenging the stable consistency of his own chivalric signification. The basic stability of Cligés' identity is lodged in the periodic rotation of his accoutrement.

Unique among Chrétien's protagonists, Perceval must forge his chivalric identity from the ground up in *Le Conte du Graal*. In this romance, which contains eighteen

⁴⁷ *Cligés*, 4601, 4705, 4771, 4849 (Cline trans. 4640, 4743, 4793, 4901). Line references refer to the moment the outcome of each combat is decided.

⁴⁸ *Cligés*, 4883-4486 (Cline trans. 4891-4).

arming acts split between Perceval and Gawain (see Table 4), armor is figured as an important indicator of Perceval's development from country bumpkin to Arthurian knight, although the true extent of this progression is hampered by the romance's incompleteness. While Lancelot, Yvain, and Erec all enter their narratives with the larger part of their knighthood already well-established, Perceval must contend with his complete ignorance of chivalric practice and courtly custom.⁴⁹ While this ignorance manifests itself in Perceval's rudeness at court and unfamiliarity with chivalric manners, in terms of armorial discourse his immaturity is evidenced most in his relationship to his one and only suit of armor. Perceval first acquires this suit after slaying a knight whom he defeats almost by chance. However, Perceval struggles to remove the knight's helmet "[il] ne set comant il lo praigne / et l'espee qu'il li desceigne" [The young man struggled to unclasp it, / But did not know the way to grasp it.]⁵⁰ In contrast to the aforementioned moment of disintegration in *Cligés*, here Chrétien's end rhyme juxtaposes Perceval's attempts to disarm another knight with his own *lack* of armorial fluency. Unwilling to admit the true nature of his difficulty, Perceval explains to the squire Yvonet that the dead knight:

⁴⁹ While *Cligés* does detail the birth and early life of its protagonist, he is initiated quickly and his narrative does not dwell on his inexperience as *Le Conte du Graal* does for Perceval.

⁵⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, *Le Conte du Graal, ou Le Roman de Perceval*, Charles Méla ed. (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1990), 1081-1082. English translations from: *Perceval, or, The Story of the Grail*, Ruth Harwood Cline, trans. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 1123-1124. Note that line numbers are dissimilar. The Old French comes from Le Mans, Médiathèque Louis Aragon 354. Cline uses Paris, BN fr. 12576.

...nules des armes an port,
Qu'eles se tienent si au cors
Que ce dedanz et ce defors
Est trestot un, si con moi sanble,
Qu'eles se tienent si ansamble.

[wore armor made to fit so tight,
his body and the armor stick
so close together, by some trick,
they seem to be all of one piece.]⁵¹

Perceval's complaint highlights both the intrinsically bound nature of armor to the chivalric body and his own exclusion from chivalric armorial discourse. As a pre-chivalric subject, Perceval both figuratively and literally cannot grasp that the armed knight could be anything but an "ansamble." Perceval's stubborn ignorance is further shown in his own resistance to removing his rustic leather clothing when Yvonet helps to arm him. Ultimately, Yvonet must arm Perceval over these clothes, despite the inappropriateness of this redundant layering of conflicting attire.⁵² The first episodes of Perceval's narrative are thus an education in chivalric conduct and he eventually transitions to his knightly accoutrements alone, leaving behind his rustic identity.⁵³ The full extent of Perceval's armorial initiation is unfortunately left unresolved. Chrétien never finished *Le Conte du Graal* and while it might be generally unproductive to

⁵¹ *Le Conte du Graal*, 1094-1097 (Cline trans. 1136-40).

⁵² *Le Conte du Graal*, 1128-1143 (Cline trans. 1173-90).

⁵³ Perceval's encounter with Gornemant represents the most significant episode in this education as the older knight instructs the younger on proper chivalric behavior (*Le Conte du Graal* 1432-1698). During Perceval's tutelage Gornemant insists that Perceval replace his rustic buckskins for arming garments befitting a knight (1600-20).

speculate about Chrétien's master plan for the romance, he exhibits an intriguing sense of internal consistency in his Arthurian works.

At one point in *Le Chevalier au Lion*, Chrétien explains Gawain's absence being a result of events that co-occur with events in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*.⁵⁴ Similarly, in the opening line of *Cligés* Chrétien mentions his having composed *Erec and Enide*.⁵⁵ These points of internal unity in Chrétien's Arthurian narratives also recommend a unity of armorial discourses. While we may never know the specifics of Chrétien's larger plan for *Le Conte du Graal*, Perceval's appearance in *Cligés* offers a small clue to what might have been a developing dissociation with armorial materiality.

The suit of armor that Perceval takes from the dead knight is notably red. In fact, the color red becomes a major identifier for Perceval throughout *Le Conte du Graal*. As mentioned above, this romance is concerned with Perceval's initiation into the chivalric order and we can reliably assume that the unfinished portions of Chrétien's text would ultimately have completed this initiation. This certainly seems to be the case in *Cligés*, when Perceval enters the tournament:

Des que Cligés le vit Mover
Et de son non oï le ver,
Que Perceval l'oï nommer,
Molt desierre a lui asanbler.
S'est del renc issuz demanoois,
Sor I destrier sor espanois,

⁵⁴ When Lunette seeks Gawain's help she discovers that he has departed to rescue the Queen, referencing events from *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*. The text also later references the concurrence of Lancelot's imprisonment by Meleagant in *Charrette* with the two sisters' conflict in *Le Chevalier au Lion*: 3511-20 and 4515-23, respectively.

⁵⁵ *Cligés*, 2 (Cline trans. 2).

Et s'armeüre fu ve[r]meille

[and when Cligés saw how he moved
and learned he had a rightful claim
to Perceval of Wales for name,
he longed to meet him and to quarrel.
Upon a Spanish steed, a sorrel,
He left the ranks and came ahead
With arms and armor that were red.]⁵⁶

Two red knights clashing on the tournament field would certainly be an image worth remarking in detail, but only one knight is identified this way. Conversely, Chrétien offers *no* description of Perceval's armor, either in terms of composition or color. Since Perceval's red armor plays such an important role in the first episodes of *Le Conte du Graal*, his apparent lack of it in *Cligés*, which takes place long after Perceval's reputation had been established, suggests that the latter episodes of *Le Conte du Graal* might have been planned to include Perceval's loss of the red armor.

This suggestion is admittedly tenuous. Most scholars comfortably assume Chrétien's composition of *Le Conte du Graal* interrupted by the poet's death. In fact, the accepted chronology of Chrétien's works places the composition of *Cligés* nearly fifteen years prior to that of *Le Conte du Graal*.⁵⁷ However, June Hall McCash suggests an alternative chronology which situates the bulk of Chrétien's writing career in a much more compressed timeframe. In her modification of Claude Luttrell's critically ignored chronology, McCash suggests that *Le Chevalier au Lion*, *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*,

⁵⁶ *Cligés*, 4765-4771 (Cline trans. 4774-80).

⁵⁷ McCash, "Reconsidering the Order of Chrétien de Troyes's Romances," 245.

Cligés, and *Le Conte du Graal* were all begun between the years 1177 and 1184.⁵⁸ In McCash's model the composition of *Cligés* still predates that of *Le Conte du Graal* despite the latter's earlier position within Chrétien's internal canon. I mention this only to suggest that the more proximate composition of these two romances makes plausible the notion that Chrétien had already conceived of his plan for Perceval by the time he wrote the character into *Cligés*.

Entertaining this possibility allows us some explanation for the trajectory of Perceval's initiation into chivalric armorial discourse. Despite his stubborn desire to remain in his first suit of armor in the extant *Le Conte du Graal*, achieving the grail and winning the renown with which he is attributed in *Cligés* may have required him to learn and accept the kind of dissociative relationship with armor that is consistent throughout Chrétien's romances: *Cligés* exhibits it, Erec must be reminded of it, Yvain reestablishes it, and Lancelot is fluent with it. *disassemblage*, just as much as *assemblage*, is at the core of Chrétien's armorial discourse and this discourse is exhibited in its purest form in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*.

Oscillatory Dis/Arming in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*

As mentioned briefly above, each of Chrétien's romances deploys armorial discourse as a foundational principle to the manifestation of chivalric identity. Many of

⁵⁸ McCash, "Reconsidering the Order of Chrétien de Troyes's Romances," 260. McCash additionally suggests that *Le Chevalier au Lion* was abandoned while *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* was being written, adding further detail to the intertwining of these two narratives.

the key dis/arming moments in Chrétien's work indicate episodic markers central to our understanding of each knight's character development and performance. A detailed inventory of the dis/arming acts in each of these romances quickly reveals the frequency and persistence of armorial imagery in these narratives (see Table 5), but nowhere is this system more dynamic and persistent than in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*. Lancelot jumps in and out of his armor twenty-three times throughout the course of the romance, begging the question of what impact these episodic divisions has on narrative structure.

As Heather Arden has observed, structural assessments of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* tend to focus on the centrality of Lancelot's relationship with the Queen. According to Arden, the primary conflict begins when Lancelot hesitates to mount the cart, an act that sets in motion a narrative of redemption and reconciliation with the Queen at its center.⁵⁹ However, Arden admits that this primary conflict is resolved midway through the text, classifying the remainder of Lancelot's exploits as "glorifying" the knight, since these later episodes demonstrate significantly little character development.⁶⁰ Like many structuralist readings of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, Arden's analysis focuses on the courtly love narrative. Susann Samples' reading of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* similarly positions Guinevere as a central motivating factor capable of

⁵⁹ Heather Arden, "Chrétien de Troyes's *Lancelot* and the Structure of Twelfth-Century French Romance," *King Arthur Through the Ages*, Valerie M. Lagorio and Mildred Leake Day, eds., (New York: Garland, 1990), 92. Additionally, in a brief treatment of the poem in "The Craft of Chrétien de Troyes: An Essay on Narrative Art" Norris J. Lacy identifies the thematic moments of humiliation and hesitation as the poem's principle structural elements (91).

⁶⁰ Arden, "Chrétien de Troyes's *Lancelot*," 93.

exercising personal and sexual agency even in captivity.⁶¹ Samples' argument helps reevaluate the gendered power structures of Lancelot's pursuit of the Queen, but does not address the latter episodes of the narrative in which the queen figures less prominently. Even Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner argues that *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* is built around an alternation between episodes of honor and shame in relation to the development of Lancelot's and the Queen's courtly love relationship while also admitting this development remains open-ended.⁶² The abduction, pursuit, and rescue of the Queen take up roughly the first 5,000 lines of the 7,115 line romance. Lancelot's interaction with the Queen during the tournament can be said to revisit the development of this love relationship, but as Arden suggests these latter episodes do not actually offer tangible character development, simply reiterating the development that has already occurred. What we are left with is roughly two-thousand lines that appear untethered to and unexplained by the courtly love narrative. Reading for more implicit structural elements, however, reveals a surprising and perhaps paradoxical *lack* of focus on the theme of the Queen. In the thousands of lines where the Queen is overtly absent, the poem is organized instead by a remarkable number of arming and disarming acts.⁶³

⁶¹ Susann Samples in "Guinevere: A Re-appraisal" *Lancelot and Guinevere: A Casebook*. Ed. Lori J. Walters, (New York: Garland, 1996), 222.

⁶² Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner in "*Le Chevalier de la Charrette*: That Obscure Object of Desire, Lancelot" *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*. Eds. Norris J. Lacy and Joan Tasker Grimbart, (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 144.

⁶³ The queen has an explicit presence from the point of Lancelot's reunification with her after his first combat with Meleagant until the second combat, roughly lines 3900-5000. Beyond this, she exists only as an abstract MacGuffin for a narrative that has an entirely different set of concerns.

While I am certainly indebted to the significant work that has been done on the courtly elements of Chrétien's romance, I am interested in the structural possibilities presented by reading into depictions of materiality rather than character. In this respect, I take a cue from Geraldine Heng's "Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," in which Heng establishes the girdle given to Gawain by Lady Bertilak as a structural referent for the poem itself. She theorizes that:

The infrastructural detail that accommodates the girdle to repeated use also accommodates it to the accumulation of diverse referents as it moves across the levels of the text, unknitting from within one discursive modality to be remade within another, in a progression that attests, perhaps invites, continual attempts at rescripting its signification.⁶⁴

Heng uses the image of the material girdle as a structuring principle for reassessing the relationship of Gawain's body and identity to the female characters in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, revealing the structurally powerful positions of the women in a romance that otherwise appears more concerned with the construction of Gawain's masculinity.⁶⁵

There are no girdles in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, at least none of note, but there is a great deal of armor, especially armor that is constantly being stripped and re-applied in much in the same way that Heng notes the girdle in *Sir Gawain* can functionally be tied and untied around the body of the knight. The significance of armor as a structural and

⁶⁴ Geraldine Heng, "Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *PMLA* 106, no. 3 (1991): 500-514.

⁶⁵ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contains one of the most detailed arming scenes in medieval romance: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon eds. Revised by Norman Davis (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1967), 566-669.

transitional element presents a more comprehensive approach to structural readings of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* than its courtly love elements may offer.

Lancelot explicitly dis/arms at least twenty-three times throughout the entirety of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*.⁶⁶ This is in addition to dis/arming moments relating to other knights such as Meleagant or Gawain. Additionally, Chrétien references armor both as a verb and as a noun in a number of permutations, using the words *armaire*, *arme*, *armer*, and *armeure* a total of 344 times, for example, and *desarmer* an additional fifty-six times. In a poem of 7,115 lines, Chrétien references arms or armor on average every seventeen lines.⁶⁷ Clearly Chrétien is not only interested in the romantic hero but is also fixated on the practical procedures of what would be a normal operation of workaday knighthood. There are plenty of practical procedures of knighthood that go unaddressed by the poet, such as the assumed presence of squires with fresh lances, the foraging of horses, or even the sharpening of weapons; all would have been essential daily practices to the real-world knight, but it seems that arming and especially its application and removal is the only aspect of chivalric equipage with which Chrétien is consistently concerned. Though they appear with less frequency than the arming words mentioned above, it is also worth noting the frequent appearance of the word *lacier*, to lace or tie (nineteen times), and *harnois* or harness, a metonymic term for the knight's equipment

⁶⁶ This does not include moments where arming or disarming occurs offstage.

⁶⁷ These numbers are based on Pierre Kuntzmann's digital transcription of the C text: (BN Fr. 794). *Analyse et Traitement Informatique de la Langue Française*. Ottawa, ON, Canada: Université d'Ottawa, 2009.

(twenty-two times), both of which carry over into Middle English as nouns and verbs that reference the arming act.⁶⁸ These instances mostly refer to the girding on or the removal of armor, and it is this process of binding and unbinding the knightly body and the moments of transition that occur when armor is fastened or unfastened that I will argue reveal a dominant organizing principle in the poem. The armorial markers that divide these episodes subvert the assumed centrality of courtly love and redirect narrative emphasis onto Lancelot's stabilization of his chivalric identity through a materially-dependent oscillatory becoming.

Dis/assembling Lancelot

Lancelot enters his narrative fully-armed and though he disarms and rearms a number of times, his fourth arming act in preparation to fight the Proud Knight is the only arming act in the romance that receives any level of detail. After Lancelot calls for his equipment and is armed by the youths of his host's household, Chrétien offers a celebratory description of how well this equipment suits the knight:

Bien sanble qu'il doie estre suens
Li chevax, tant li avenoit,
Et li escuz que il tenoit
Par les enarmes anbracié
Si ot un hiaume el chief lacié
Qui tant i estoit bien assis
Que il ne vos fust mie avis

⁶⁸ There is also a compositional reason to read materiality into the doubling of form and function in the appearance of "lacier" within the framework of interlaced narratives. However, for my purposes further development of this reading of Chrétien's poetics would be unproductive.

Qu'anprunté n'acreü l'eüst
Einz deïssiez, tant vos pleüst,
Qu'il fu ensi nez et creüz

[The horse could not be anything
But his own, so well did it suit him—
As did the shield he held
By the armstraps.
He had a helmet laced on his head
Which fit so perfectly
You would never have thought
He had borrowed it or wore it on credit.
Rather you would say, so pleasing was this sight of him,
That he had been born and raised to it.]⁶⁹

This description of Lancelot's armor further emphasizes the way in which the knight so perfectly embodies his helmet, shield, and horse that the reader cannot help but think that they were made for him, despite their having been borrowed. This is the only instance of a well-developed arming act in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, most of Lancelot's other arming acts being described only in brief and rarely with the kind of armorial inventory we see in *Erec et Enide*. Here we get just the basics: horse, helmet, and shield and only in relation to how well Lancelot wears them. Despite Chrétien's insistence of this equipment's appropriateness to the knight, this passage also highlights the motif of armorial dissociation permeating the romance: Lancelot rarely, if ever, uses his own equipment and maintains no lasting attachment to the equipment he borrows. This arming act occurs after the knight has ridden two borrowed horses to death and left behind the armor he was wearing when he first appeared.⁷⁰ Even Lancelot's exploits during the

⁶⁹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 2665-2676.

⁷⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 296, 306.

Tournament and the final combat with Meleagant involve suits of armor borrowed from his jailer's wife and Gawain, respectively.⁷¹ For Chrétien this dissociation from personal ownership is unproblematic and even glorifies Lancelot as universally capable no matter whose equipment he uses. As with Erec and especially Cligés, Lancelot's chivalric identity is affirmed simply by the presence of armor without any stable attachment to a particular suit. Lancelot has not been born and bred to use this suit in particular but armor in general; armor *becomes* him, in both senses of the word.

While a disarming act represents a binary opposition to an arming act it does not necessarily imply chivalric un-becoming, even though such moments regularly make the chivalric body vulnerable. Lancelot's first peaceful disarming act occurs upon his arrival at the tower containing the Forbidden Bed: "Maintenant qu'il fu deschauciez / El lit" [As soon as he had removed his armor / He got into bed.]⁷² While it is the obvious thing to do when going to bed, shedding his armor makes Lancelot vulnerable to the thrust of the magical Flaming Lance that makes the bed so perilous:

Et li fers de la lance passe
Au chevalier lez le costé
Si qu'il li a del cuir osté
un po, mes n'est mie bleciez.

[The iron tip of the lance grazed
The knight's side;

⁷¹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 5498-5499, 6906-6911.

⁷² Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 503-504. I use Cline's titles for episodes, objects, and key characters. Strangely, the lady of the house had summoned several valets for this purpose but the text leaves them out of the actual disarming (446-447). It could be argued that their involvement is implied, but since it is not explicit the agency remains with Lancelot.

It removed a little skin,
But he was not actually wounded.]⁷³

This is the first of three instances in which Lancelot is threatened with bodily harm while unarmed. Fortunately, the lance merely grazes Lancelot, but this close shave establishes an anxiety of disarmament that prompts a need to reiterate armored wholeness. Of course it would not make sense for Lancelot to remain armed while in the comfort of a domestic space, but nonetheless the danger posed by the flaming lance would be mitigated by armor. In fact, domestic spaces of disarmament regularly threaten Lancelot with leakage.⁷⁴

A similar scene occurs in the bedroom of the Amorous Hostess. Here Lancelot is invited to remove his armor in a seemingly unpopulated house only to be set upon by knights that appear to be in the process of raping the Hostess. Lancelot instinctively defends her, but having left his armor in the hall his body is just as vulnerable as it was in the Forbidden Bed. Lancelot fights with the hostess' would-be rapists just as he would on the battlefield, but his state of chivalric undress allows him to be grazed by an axe before the hostess reveals that the combat was an elaborate theater concocted to induce Lancelot into a knightly performance.⁷⁵ It is important to note in this scene, as with the Forbidden Bed, that Lancelot performs the disarming act himself:

⁷³ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 524-527.

⁷⁴ Citrome explores the literal and figurative liquification of the body suggested by the medical condition *fistula in ano*, understanding the medieval surgeon as attempting to prevent this kind of leakage, "Bodies that Splatter," 139.

⁷⁵ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 1144-1148. Lacy considers Lancelot's first fight with Meleagant to be a thematic echo of this combat that demonstrates the poem's

De son col oste son escu
li chevaliers et si le pant
a un croc, et sa lance prant
et met sor un hantier an haut.

[The knight lifted his shield
From his neck and hung it
On a hook; he took his lance
And laid it upon a rack]⁷⁶

Chrétien makes a point to note that Lancelot is alone in the house during this disarming act. Though there are plenty of hooks and racks upon which to store each item of his chivalric assemblage, there is no squire or steward present to help Lancelot disarm. He must enact his own disassembly, which makes Lancelot at least partially responsible for his own vulnerability and wounding in the bedroom. While we cannot suppose that Lancelot expected the battle that takes place there, this sequence of disarming followed by combat reveals the inherent danger of armorial dissociation. Beyond the potential damage to his body, how does disarming himself open Lancelot up to the dissolution of his chivalric identity?⁷⁷

Lancelot's experience with the Forbidden Bed and the Amorous Hostess are merely introductions to the knight's most profound moment of armorial dissociation on

tight *conjointure*: "Spatial Form in Medieval Romance." *Yale French Studies* 51 (1974): 167.

⁷⁶ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 1000-1003.

⁷⁷ Cohen makes a similar note about the vulnerability of Lancelot in his analysis of Lancelot's amorous encounter with the Queen, understanding the "sanc" [blood] which the knight leaves behind to represent a castration or deflowering that threatens his corporeal integrity. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 104-105.

the Sword Bridge. Lancelot disarms in preparation to cross the Sword Bridge, reasoning that his armor's weight and lack of tactile precision would hinder his crossing:

Et fet mout estrange mervoille,
Que ses piez desire et ses mains.
N'iert mie toz antiers ne sains,
Quant de l'autre part iert venuz.
Bien s'iert sor l'espee tenuz,
Qui plus estoit tranchanz que fauz,
As mains nues et si deschauz
Que il ne s'est lessiez an pie
Souler ne chauce n'avanpié.

[surprised them exceedingly
By removing the armor from his feet and hands—
He would not be whole and uninjured
When he reached the other side!
He would support himself on the sword,
Which was sharper than a scythe,
On his bare hands and feet.
He left nothing on his feet:
Neither shoes, mail leggings, nor socklets.]⁷⁸

As with the previous instances of disarming, Lancelot is wounded as a result of having actively removed the elements that would prevent harm to his flesh; he disassembles himself and is in turn further disassembled by an exaggerated and externalized object of chivalric violence: “A la gratn dolor c'on li fist / s'an passe outre et a grant destrece-- / mains et genolz et piez se blece” [In the extreme pain it caused him / And in great distress he crossed, / Wounding his hands, knees, and feet.]⁷⁹ The sword does not simply wound him in general but on three separate points of contact that suggest an attempt at

⁷⁸ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 3096-3104.

⁷⁹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 3110-3112.

disassembly. From the Flaming Lance to the bedroom of the Amorous Hostess to the Sword Bridge, the wounds Lancelot sustains after removing his armor have become progressively worse and thus challenge the integrity of his chivalric body with increasing severity. This begs the question of armor's usefulness as a preventative measure when the knight who wears the armor constantly doffs it when it would be most useful.

The difference lies in the occasion; each of the three scenes of peaceful disarming happen outside of the context of combat, but when examined *within* the context of combat we find that armor, though prone to disintegration, remains particularly effective in maintaining Lancelot's corporeal wholeness. Soon after the first arming scene discussed above, Lancelot engages in combat with the Proud Knight, whose defeat offers a contrasting example of armorial disintegration. When Lancelot and the Proud Knight come together, the progress of the fight is measured in damage done to armor. Their blows "ronpent les fers" [broke the chain links], illustrating the *unbecoming* that occurs as the result of chivalric violence.⁸⁰ Lancelot's fury burns so hot against the Proud Knight that the combat results in violent armorial disassembly:

Si li passe et tel le conroie
Qu'il n'i remaint laz ne corroie
Qu'il ne ronpe antor le coler;
Si li fet le hiaume voler
Del chief et cheoir la vantaille.

[He struck and assailed him
Until no lacing or strap remained
Unbroken around his neck-band.
He knocked the helmet

⁸⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 2687-2690.

From his head, and the ventail flew off.]⁸¹

This is the first of two moments in this combat where the Proud Knight's armor is rent asunder, highlighting the failure of both his chivalric equipment and his chivalric identity. The violence of this moment also represents a stark contrast in comparison to the detail of Lancelot's preceding arming act. The sequence of Lancelot's arming followed by the Proud Knight's defeat again reveals the anxiety of disintegration that an arming act serves to allay. Lancelot remains remarkably whole while simultaneously ripping his opponent apart at the seams. In this way, Lancelot is himself responsible for violently disarming the Proud Knight, a fact that culminates in a killing blow that foreshadow's Lancelot's final battle with Meleagant:

que cil par le hiaume le sache,
si que trestoz le laz an tranche:
la vantaille et la coiffe blanche
li abat de la teste jus.
[The other grabbed him by the helmet,
Tearing off all the fastenings:
The ventail and the white coif
He struck from off his head.]⁸²

In practical terms, Lancelot is merely preparing the Proud Knight for his subsequent beheading, but in terms of chivalric identity this purposeful and violent removal symbolically preempts the beheading. Revisiting Citrome's understanding of containment, this scene is reminiscent of ripping a bandage from a staunch wound; the integrity of the knight's body disintegrates and he can no longer stand: "Cil fiert et la

⁸¹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 2737-2741.

⁸² Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler, trans. 2906-2909.

teste li vole / enmi la lande, et li cors chiet” [His blow sent the head flying / Out onto the heath; the body crumpled.]⁸³ His armor breached and his head removed, the chivalric body of the Proud Knight is permanently disassembled with no hope of reassembly. Chrétien’s knights regularly disarm their defeated opponents before delivering the final blow. It is not enough for a knight to yield; his armorial integrity and by extension his chivalric signification must be broken down. This is the case with the Tall Knight in *Erec et Enide* and the Storm Knight in *Le Chevalier au Lion*, among many others.⁸⁴ These disarming acts highlight the contrast between the victor and the defeated, emphasizing the relative wholeness of the victorious knight, even if his armor has been damaged during the course of combat. It is worth noting that the four lines describing the disarming of the Proud knight are far more detailed than the two lines of the actual beheading, suggesting the greater symbolic weight of the disarming act versus the actual defeat.

Lancelot’s armor does not always remain as intact as it does during his combat with the Proud Knight. While this combat serves to reaffirm Lancelot’s prowess and wholeness on the battlefield, this is not a stable or consistent state. His first combat with Meleagant illustrates the eventuality of disintegration especially against a far more capable opponent than the Proud Knight. Once on the other side of the sword bridge, after he has dealt with his wounds and rearmed himself, Lancelot almost immediately

⁸³ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler, trans. 2922-2923.

⁸⁴ *Erec et Enide* 5994-5997 (Cline trans. 5952-5956), *Le Chevalier au Lion* 860-861 (Cline trans. 807-815).

engages in battle with Meleagant. This combat is fierce. Both knights are well matched and fight with such vigor that “Que il eüst mout fort toné, / Qu’il n’i remest peitrax ne cengle” [no rein or stirrup was unriven / there was not one intact breast strap], and later, “Sovant si asperemant se reent / Les hiaumes et les haubers blans / Qu’après le fer an saut li sans” [They savagely slashed / Helmets and gleaming hauberks, / Causing blood to gush from beneath the torn metal.]⁸⁵ Whereas the damage dealt during combat with the Proud Knight was almost entirely localized upon the body of Lancelot’s antagonist, in Lancelot’s combat with Meleagant Chrétien implies a mutual disintegration of armor. On a practical level, this damage is to be expected during a fierce combat with sharp weapons, especially in an age before the full coverage of plate armor. In his account of this armorial disintegration, however, Chrétien pays special attention to the failure of straps, stirrups and laces, all components that are significantly weaker than the armor itself and that serve to join the seams of chain mail and bind other more resilient armorial elements. The violence of this conflict reveals that the central goal of chivalric combat is the deconstruction of the opponent’s armored self. The violence that each combatant inflicts upon his foe puts the bodies of both Lancelot and Meleagant in danger of disintegration or unraveling; the knots, lacings, and bindings of their armors struggle and fail to contain their chivalric subjects.

Surprisingly, disintegration or disassembly is not actually a problem. Neither Lancelot nor Meleagant disintegrate entirely. They are healed soon after this combat and

⁸⁵ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 3598-3599, 3612-3614.

in the meantime they have both given a spectacular demonstration of their chivalric prowess. Despite the strong association between armor and identity, the harm this combat has done to armor is not irreparable or even unexpected but rather creates the conditions for maintenance and reemphasizes a cycle of chivalric arming and disarming already at work in the romance. Whether peacefully or violently, a disarming act calls attention to the vulnerability of the unarmed body and is accordingly no less important within the discourse of chivalric identity than the arming act. This is not to say that the binary is undynamic. In fact, Chrétien's chivalric subjects develop most in terms of their realization and acceptance of this binary. In this sense, the Sword Bridge and the subsequent battle with Meleagant represent an important transition in Lancelot's exercise of armorial agency. As seen with the Forbidden Bed, the Amorous Hostess, and the Sword Bridge, when Lancelot takes it upon himself to disarm, he reminded of his vulnerability with increasing severity. However, after the Sword Bridge Lancelot appears to accept a more passive relationship to disarming, as if he has come to accept the cyclical motion of the identity machine of which he is a part. Lancelot continues to participate in the binary cycle of damage and repair, but when given the opportunity to peacefully disarm he takes a passive role.

A key example of this passive assimilation into armorial discourse occurs during the Tournament episode. After Lancelot has resolved his conflict with the Queen and participated in a second combat with Meleagant, Lancelot participates in a tournament disguised in a suit of red armor lent to him by his jailer's wife. This tournament highlights the dissociative relationship he has adopted with armor. As the prospective

combatants arrive on the tournament grounds, Chrétien explains that “Armé et desarmé asanblent” [armed and unarmed, the knights assembled.]⁸⁶ Kibler translates this line as “armed and unarmed knights clashed,” ignoring the fact that the tournament has yet to begin at this point in the narrative. This line more clearly indicates the gathering together of chivalric bodies that are classified both by their relationship to their armor and by their active participation in the assembly of a biometallic chivalric mass. Lancelot is among the armed that have assembled for this tournament, but rather than simply performing at the peak of his ability, he allows the Queen to dictate his performance, submitting his chivalric agency to external control.⁸⁷ While the Queen allows the disguised Lancelot a victory at the end of the tournament, this comes after two days of feigned cowardice that outwardly undermines his chivalric performance while also teaching him, the knight under the red armor, to dissociate himself from his armorial identity.⁸⁸ At the end of the tournament episode, it appears Lancelot has come to fully understand the role of his corporeal self within the chivalric assemblage. Showing little regard for the material signifiers of his identity at the end of the tournament, he lets the armor he is wearing drop

⁸⁶ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, 5598. Translation mine.

⁸⁷ Cohen develops this relationship more fully in his chapter on *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* in *Medieval Identity Machines*, understanding it in Deleuzeguattarian sadomasochistic terms.

⁸⁸ Similar to Lacy and Wright’s respective assessments of identity in terms of identification, in *The Performance of Self* Susan Crane explores identity as a function of public performance that leads to a “chivalric incognito” in which the knight’s identity becomes enmeshed with the appearance or identifiability of his armor. Crane considers *Yvain* a solid representation of this form of chivalric identity (129).

to the ground and departs through a crowd of spectators, seemingly leaving his identity behind:

Mes au departir son escu
Leissa an la presse cheoir.
La ou greignor la pot veoir.
Et sa lance et sa couverture,
Puis si s'an va grant aleüre.
Si s'an ala si en anblee
Que nus de tote l'asamblee
Qui la fust, garde ne s'an prist.

[...as they separated he let
His shield, lance, and trappings
Fall where the press
Seemed to be the thickest,
And he hastened away.
His departure was so furtive
That no one in all the assembled crowd
Took any notice of it.]⁸⁹

In her reading of the Tournament episode, Wright focuses on the ability of Lancelot's borrowed armor to situate him within a disintegrating code of chivalric recognition that has its effect mainly upon the spectators, the Queen included.⁹⁰ Wright's understanding of clothing as a medium for social recognition help explain the assembled crowd's ability to absorb the sartorial (read: armorial) signifiers of the "chevaliers vermauz" [vermillion knight.]⁹¹ Lancelot appears to take no notice of his falling equipment, passively allowing himself to fall apart among the gathered crowd (l'asamblee) and demonstrating his

⁸⁹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 6028-6035.

⁹⁰ Wright, *Weaving Narrative*, 76.

⁹¹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 5714. Wright similarly ignores the complication of the red armor not having been Lancelot's in the first place.

progressively dissociative relationship with the material elements of his knighthood. In this moment the crowd itself seems to absorb the armor, leaving the ambiguous body to go its own way without notice or concern. His lack of anxiety comes from his acceptance that his medieval identity machine will continue to function without his interference, enacting chivalric becoming, in Cohen's sense of the word, through social assemblage. This reveals the cyclicity of material identity. As Heng concludes of the girdle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the material components of identity are capable of continually rescripting their signification through alternating moments of fastening and unfastening.⁹² Heng's analogy is particularly relevant here since Gawain exercises very little control over the ways in which he is surrounded by and bound within a system of identificatory control.

Lancelot's final combat with Meleagant represents a culmination of all three categories of dis/arming and further emphasizes the independent operation of the armorial identity machines. During this penultimate episode Lancelot is armed in Gawain's armor; is violently disarmed in combat with Meleagant and violently disarms Meleagant; and when combat has ended in Meleagant's beheading, is peacefully disarmed by the assembled crowd. The arming act is brief; Gawain disarms and Lancelot arms in the space of only four lines:

[Gauvain] disvest son hauberk et sache
de son dos, et toz se desarme.
Lanceloz de ces armes s'arme
tot sanz delaie ets sanz demore.

⁹² Heng, "Feminine Knots," 509.

[So he loosed his hauberk and lifted it
From his back, then disarmed himself totally.
Lancelot armed himself with these arms
Quickly and without delay.]⁹³

As in his arming before fighting the Proud Knight, Lancelot dons another man's armor with ease, again reminding us of the relative unimportance of ownership or attachment. The poet might easily have observed, as with the borrowed red armor, that we "would never have thought / He had borrowed it or wore it on credit."

As with Lancelot's first combat with Meleagant, the progress of this combat is measured through the disintegration of armor. This fight itself is not as lengthy or as detailed as the first nor does it need to be; Lancelot has already demonstrated his fluency with the binaries of armorial discourse and the particulars no longer need ironing out. Lancelot begins by severing Meleagant's "braz destre de fer covert" [steel-covered right arm], literally dis-arming him, then slicing open his belly and slashing his helmet.⁹⁴ Delivering the final blow to a yet-defiant Meleagant, "Lanceloz vient, si li deslace / le hiaume et la teste li tranche" [Lancelot approached, unlaced / Meleagant's helmet and cut off his head.]⁹⁵ Lancelot's blows are unhindered by Meleagant's armor; he dismembers most of Meleagant's functional body seemingly without effort. Yet in the final blow Lancelot takes the time to unlace Meleagant's helmet, disassembling the antagonist's knighthood and symbolically removing him from chivalric signification in a way that is

⁹³ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 6908-6911.

⁹⁴ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 7062, 7075-7080.

⁹⁵ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 7086-7087.

strikingly reminiscent of Lancelot's execution of the Proud Knight. While the similarities represent clear instances of foreshadowing and narrative interlacing, this scene compares to the previous one in another very important way. In almost all instances of knightly disarmament in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*, when a knight is performing the disarming of either himself or another knight, violence and leakage is certain to follow. This is true of the Proud Knight and of Meleagant; it is also true of Lancelot in the house of the Amorous Hostess and before the Sword Bridge. Once Meleagant is beheaded, however, "Lancelot desarment adonques / cil qui plus lié an fuerent onques, / si l'en ont mené a grant joie" [Then the happiest among them / helped Lancelot remove his arms / And led him off amid great joy.]⁹⁶ A simple number shift from the singular "desarme" in some of the more perilous disarming scenes to the plural "desarment" makes all the difference in the poem's last lines as, harkening back to the tournament episode, Lancelot allows himself to be disarmed and this time not by a nondescript force but by Arthur's subjects.⁹⁷ Lancelot does not disintegrate like the Proud Knight or Meleagant, but rather, by being disarmed, is instead dispersed and absorbed by a communal body that maintains the integrity of the assembled chivalric subject. Much like Lancelot's passive disarming after the Tournament, this final narrative moment confirms the oscillatory stability of

⁹⁶ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 7096-7098.

⁹⁷ This form only appears twice in the entire romance. The preceding instance occurs when squires disarm Lancelot at the house of the vavasour after the defeat of the Proud Knight (2945).

Lancelot's identity by maintaining his ability to signify knighthood even after the dispersal of his armorial self into the assembled crowd.

Dissassembling Lancelot's Symbolic Armor

Thus far I have been concerned primarily with literal depictions of armor. Chrétien's depiction of armor's materiality in conjunction with his remarkable consistency with signaling transitional dis/arming acts make clear the centrality of armorial materiality to chivalric performance and identity. The unarmed chivalric subject perpetually pursues the wholeness of armorial assemblage but both the peaceful practicality of daily life and the violent performance necessitated by chivalric duty reiterate disassemblage, thus perpetuating a kind of chivalric identity that I have been calling "oscillatory becoming" of medieval romance chivalric identity. The chivalric assemblage bears deeper implications than the literal and immediate equipment of day-to-day chivalry. While stable, this binary cycle of assemblage/disassemblage represents a far more stable model than Cohen's eruptive becoming. Rather than pursuing a program of perpetual (but never complete) becoming, as Cohen supposes, Chrétien's chivalric subjects are locked in an always-moving but never-progressing holding pattern. As much as armor contains the chivalric subject, as Citrome suggests, it also imprisons him. Chrétien demonstrates some awareness of this idea in a symbolic category of armorial discourse in which the armor is not necessarily armor but a Tower, the romance's most overdetermined signifier of corporeal control.

In his famous thirteenth-century chivalric manual, Ramon Llull explains the symbolism of each piece of the knight's equipment, noting that the hauberk in particular "signifies a castle and fortress against vices and faults."⁹⁸ In form and function, architectural fortifications bear a great resemblance to armor: the stones are hard and closely interlocked, the structure itself protects against the violence of warfare, and perhaps most importantly, entering (or alternately, arming oneself with) such a fortification protects a chivalric body from the violence of men and nature. Meleagant's specifications for the prison tower are remarkably reminiscent of armor's enclosure: "Ensi volt qu'ele fust celee, / Ne n'I remest huis ne antree / Fors c'une petite fenestre" [He wanted it to be sealed / In such a way that there remained no door nor opening, / Save only a small window.]⁹⁹ This description could easily serve for the full-body equipment depicted in Figures 1 and 3, down to the singular opening which the poet indicates is used for the passage of food.¹⁰⁰ In this sense we may read Lancelot's internment in Meleagant's prison-tower as an arming act of the symbolic order, one in which Lancelot is appropriately passive.¹⁰¹ Not only has this tower been made-to-order to

⁹⁸ Llull continues: "for likewise as a castle or fortress is closed all about, in likewise a hauberk is firm and closed in all places to the end that it gives significance to a noble knight that his courage ought not enter into treason, nor to any vice," Ramon Llull, *Book of Knighthood & Chivalry, Ramon Llull's Book of Knighthood & Chivalry and the Anonymous Ordene de Chevalerie*, (William Caxton trans., Brian R. Price rendering, 2001, Brian R. Price), 65. Citrome identifies Llull's architectural articulation of armor as a "formulation [that] depends on an aesthetics of enclosure" ("Bodies that Splatter" 164).

⁹⁹ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 6137-6139.

¹⁰⁰ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 6141-6142.

¹⁰¹ In many ways, this Tower is an inversion of Lancelot's amorous encounter with the Queen since he is wounded while penetrating or disarming an image of fortification.

encase Lancelot's body, but its existence as a static structure, a strong contrast to the mobility and flexibility of a mail hauberk, also removes any lingering notions of volition from the bound chivalric subject. Lancelot's body is inert in the tower and can only waste away through lack of activity.

Dissassembling this final example of Lancelot's armor is especially complex and broadens our understanding of the dis/assemblage binary to include not simply the materials of armor but the methods of its manufacture. It is particularly important that Melegant's sister releases Lancelot from his bonds through a doubled symbol of lacing and forging as she attaches a pickaxe to a rope.¹⁰² In terms of narrative interlacing, it is worth noting that this woman reveals herself to be not only Melegant's sister but also the same lady for whom Lancelot decapitated the Proud Knight almost half of the entire romance prior. The lady reveals this fact on lines 6572-6578, referencing events that occur in lines 2779-2937. This callback is far more than a basic interlacing of her character but rather represents an overarching splice of the romance's two main narrative and spatial halves, those events occurring before and after the crossing of the Sword Bridge. The image of the workman's tool acting upon an object of corporeal containment makes this link all the more provocative:¹⁰³

Lorse la fille Bademagu

¹⁰² "Corde" in the Old French. Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 6614.

¹⁰³ The *Minnesinger Codex (Codex Manesse)* contains a number of images of armorial forging, usually depicting a smith working a great helm on an anvil. He holds the helm with tongs in one hand and swings a double-sided mallet with the other: *Große Heidelberger Liederhandschrift (Codex Manesse)*. Universitäts Bibliothek Heidelberg. Cod. Pal. germ 848. <<http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/cpg848>>., 256^v and 381^r.

Un pic fort, quarré et agu
Porquiert, et tantost si le baille
Celui qui tant an hurte et *maille*,
Et tant a feru et boté,
Neporquant s'il li a grevé,
Qu'issuz s'an est legieremant.

[Then the daughter of King Bademagu
Found a solid pickaxe, as strong as it was sharp.
She brought it to Lancelot,
Who hammered and pounded
And struck and dug,
Though it pained his weakened body,
Until he was able to crawl out easily]¹⁰⁴

This disarming act requires more than the typical removal of armor, requiring that Lancelot actively work upon its surface in much the same way that an enemy knight might work upon Lancelot's armor. This suggests more than straightforward disassembly; the verbs Chrétien uses to describe Lancelot's destruction of the Tower, "hurte," "maille," "feru," and "boté" invoke not simply the destructive force of the "pic" but the productive strike of the blacksmith's hammer. "Feru" in particular, while vaguely describing a blow or strike, is rooted in "fer" or iron. Even more remarkably, the poet

¹⁰⁴ Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, Kibler trans., 6619-6625. Emphasis mine.

uses the word “maille,” which describes both an act of striking or hammering as well as the Lancelot’s primary armorial technology, mail.¹⁰⁵ Of course, the major contrast here is in the stiffness of the “armor” upon which Lancelot works. The Tower lacks the fluid articulation of mail, perhaps suggesting that this scene more closely resembles the work of a smith upon a great helm than upon mail armor but still recommending the work of a mechanical hand upon the material elements of chivalry (Figure 7).¹⁰⁶ In this way the binary rhetoric of chivalric dis/assemblage as it maps onto dis/arming acts also applies to the language of manufacture/deconstruction.



Figure 7: A smith working on a great helm in the Codex Manesse.

The Tower scene also represents Lancelot’s last encounter with overdetermined chivalric elements that populate the landscape of *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*. At this point in the narrative Lancelot has encountered three separate enlargements of chivalric gear: the Flaming Lance, the Sword Bridge, and the Prison Tower. Each of these represent abstracted, overdetermined, disassembled, and disembodied elements of

¹⁰⁵ *Middle English Dictionary* “pik” (n.), “mal” (n.), “maller” (n.), “mallen” (v.), and “maille” (n.).

¹⁰⁶ *Codex Manesse*, 848. 256^v

chivalric assemblage. The Lance has no wielder yet as it descends from the ceiling it threatens Lancelot's body. The same goes for the Sword Bridge, with the added significance of its exaggerated size. The Prison Tower is similarly enlarged, an excessively large representation of Lancelot's usual accoutrement. In each of these instances the landscape of the romance seeks to instruct Lancelot on his relationship to his armored self. The Flaming Lance and the Sword Bridge in particular are reminders of just how essential armor is in maintaining corporeal integrity, but they are only capable of doing so when Lancelot has removed his armor of his own volition. These disarmings contrast sharply with the horses Lancelot rides to death when he enters the narrative and especially with the borrowed armor he wears during the many chivalric combats throughout the romance. Most of the time, Lancelot's equipment fails progressively as a result of practical and proper use; the horse is exhausted while Lancelot pursues the Queen, and the straps and links of his armor disintegrate during combat with the Proud Knight and with Meleagant. The threats of wounding from the Lance and the Bridge, on the other hand, as with his experience in the bedroom of the Amorous Hostess, represent the anxiety of disarmament writ large. However, despite the desire to re-arm, these moments of anxiety imply, they also demonstrate the importance of both armed and disarmed states of armorial being.

Details of clothing, argues Wright, "do not simply provide character development or realism through accumulation of detail; they also structure the plot, providing thematic

coherence through repetition, reflection, or analogy.”¹⁰⁷ Lancelot’s body progresses in much the same way as the text he inhabits. If Lancelot can be said to experience any character development aside from his reconciliation with the Queen midway through the romance, it is a transition in his relationship to his armor. Though his performance of medieval chivalric masculinity is initially bound up in his equipment, the equipment itself becomes less important as a physical object and progressively more internalized and incorporated within the body of the knight. Though the laces and links of his armored self are an essential medium upon which Lancelot articulates his chivalric performance, the Knight of the Cart also demonstrates the potential for identificatory signification through moments of disassembly. He is surrounded at all points by the imagery of binding and armoring that encircles and defines the limits of his body and his chivalric performance and that demands constant revisitations of armed and disarmed states of being in order to maintain an essential instability. The eruptive becoming of medieval chivalry is not a parabolic approach toward a single apex of perfection, but rather an oscillating waveform that is only capable of maintaining stability through perpetual reiteration. Lancelot maintains chivalric signification not through the permanent attachment of his equipment to his body but through comfortable movement between states of assemblage and disassemblage. His dissociation from his armor is not problematic to his identity, but an

¹⁰⁷ Wright, *Weaving Narrative*, 7. Pursuing the connection of textile to interlace structure she notes, “Clothing in the romance of the period became part of the weave of the text, appearing and disappearing at intervals, like a thread in a tapestry, structuring as it embellishes” (Ibid).

essential component to his fluent engagement with armorial discourse and therefore represents the most stable of Chrétien's armored chivalric subjects. Lancelot's relationship with armor is a benchmark by which we can assess the other knights in Chrétien's literary corpus as well as the work of later romancers who draw upon the armorial discourse he initiated.

Appendix: Inventories of the Dis/arming Acts of Chrétien's Primary Protagonists

Table 1: An inventory of arming/disarming acts in *Erec et Enide*

| Arming (A) or Disarming (D) | Scene | Line Ref. |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| - | Erec enters the narrative unarmed, which prevents him from taking immediate action in the abduction of the queen's maid. | 239-40 |
| A | Aided by Enide in preparation to find and fight the Sparrow Hawk (his 1 st suit). | 709 |
| - | Erec's armor withstands combat with the Sparrow Hawk. | 879-894 |
| - | <i>Long interlude in which Erec's domesticity is framed as problematic to his masculinity. No armor is mentioned throughout.</i> | 984-2626 |
| A | Sends a squire to fetch his armor. Enide aids in the most detailed arming act in all of Chrétien's romances (his 2 nd suit). | 2626-48 |
| - | Erec's armor withstands combat with Galoain (who refuses to wear armor). | 3575 |
| D* | Armor disintegrates during the drawbridge battle with Guivret. | 3762-818 |
| D | By courtiers. Erec has been wounded beneath his armor. | 4189 |
| A | Upon waking. His armor is put on over his bandages. | 4265 |
| D? | The armor exacerbates his wounds. | 4553 |
| D | By a well-contented Enide who dresses his wounds. | 5092 |
| A** | Chrétien uses only the word "aparellié." | 5132 |
| A | With armor sent to him by Arthur (his 3 rd suit). | 5639 |
| D* | During combat with the Tall Knight, Mabonograin | 5952 |

*Disarmings resulting from combat

**Symbolic dis/arming acts

Note: Erec explicitly dis/arms ten times 6879 lines of poetry, an average of one dis/arming act every 688 lines.

Table 2: An inventory of arming/disarming acts in *Le Chevalier au Lion*

| Arming (A) or Disarming (D) | Scene | Line Ref. |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| - | Though he is not the primary protagonist, Calogrenant dis/arms four times in the first 521 lines of the poem. | - |
| A | Yvain arms after secretly departing to pursue the quest of the Storm Knight. | 690 |
| D* | Yvain and the Storm Knight shatter each others' equipment | 789 |
| - | <i>Long interlude involving Yvain's courtship of Laudine. No explicit dis/arming acts occur.</i> | - |
| A | Arming implied when Yvain arrives at the fountain fully-armed to fight Kay. | 2075 |
| A** | Laudine's ring figured as protective equipment. | 2441 |
| - | <i>Many dis/armings implied but not detailed during Yvain's time away at tournaments with Gawain.</i> | - |
| D** | Lunete takes the ring away. | 2605 |
| D** | In his madness, Yvain disrobes. | 2639 |
| A | Upon regaining his sanity, he asks for a horse and armor. | 2954 |
| D* | Yvain faints and impales himself on his sword (his mail fails). | 3304 |
| D | He is disarmed by young girls upon arriving at the walled town besieged by Harpin. | 3608 |
| A | Armed by the men of the house in preparation to fight Harpin. | 3942 |
| D | In order to be healed after his fight with Harpin. | 4464 |
| D | The lady of the besieged town helps him disarm. | 5173 |
| A | In preparation to fight the demon brothers. | 5313 |
| D* | His shield and helmet shatter under the blows of the demon brothers. | 5320 |
| - | <i>Implied arming makes him unrecognizable to Gawain.</i> | - |
| D* | During battle with Gawain. | 5852 |
| D | Gawain and Yvain help each other disarm. | 6162 |
| - | <i>Implied arming makes him unrecognizable to Laudine.</i> | - |

*Disarmings resulting from combat

**Symbolic dis/arming acts

Note: Yvain explicitly dis/arms sixteen times 6810 lines of poetry, an average of one dis/arming act every 426 lines.

Table 3: An inventory of arming/disarming acts in *Cligés*

| Arming (A) or Disarming (D) | Scene | Line Ref. |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| D | Alexander claims he will never arm himself until he reaches Arthur's Court. | 116-9 |
| A | Both Alexander and his men arm in response to the approach of the murderers. <i>Armor features prominently in the siege but Alexander himself never explicitly disarms</i> | 1697-1933 |
| | <i>Interlude recounting Alexander's marriage to Soredamors, the birth of Cligés, the death of Alexander, and Cligés love of Fenice</i> | 2200-2818 |
| - | Implied that Cligés arms for the tournament but it is never described. | 2866 |
| A | Cligés sets out to rescue Fenice. | 3366 |
| D/A | Cligés adopts a defeated knight's armor | 3461-6 |
| A* | His mail actively resists being destroyed in combat. | 3756 |
| A | For battle with a duke. Cligés uses arms given to him by the emperor. | 3965-82 |
| A | In preparation for the tournament. Cligés orders his squires to acquire three different suits in different colors: black, red, and green. | 4552-73 |
| A | Cligés arms in black to fight Sagremore. | 4615-7 |
| D | Disarming implied after the above duel. He places the green armor before his tent and hides the black armor. | 4668 |
| A | Arming implied when he enters the field in green to fight Lancelot. | 4729 |
| D | Disarming implied after the above duel. He places the red armor before his tent and hides the green armor. | 4760 |
| A | Arming implied when he enters the field in red to fight Perceval. | 4771-84 |
| D* | He fights so much in the tourney that he makes an anvil of his shield. | 4808-10 |
| D/A | Cligés has the red shield removed and puts on his original armor. | 4821-27 |
| D* | Cligés and Gawain mutually tear each other's mail. | 4891 |
| A | When heading for a cemetery. No added detail in this dis/arming act. | 6094 |

*Disarmings resulting from combat

**Symbolic dis/arming acts

Note: Both Alexander and his son Cligés dis/arm sixteen times 6664 lines of poetry, an average of one dis/arming act every 416 lines.

Table 4: An inventory of arming/disarming acts in *Le Conte du Graal*

| Arming (A) or Disarming (D) | Scene | Line Ref. |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| A** | Perceval's rude hunting gear is a placeholder for his later armor. | 79 |
| D*/A | Perceval defeats the Red Knight and takes his armor for himself. | 1149-59, 1175-90 |
| D | Helped by a young lad upon meeting Gornemant. | 1420 |
| D | By squires in a desolate town. | 1777 |
| A | To fight for the seductive maiden. | 2140 |
| D | After defeating Anguingueron | 2337 |
| A | In preparation to fight Clamadeu. | 2644 |
| D | By four squires at the Grail Castle. | 3070 |
| A | Upon waking at the Grail Castle (he arms without assistance). | 3367 |
| A | Gawain arms to pursue Perceval. <i>This also indicates a narrative shift to the second protagonist.</i> | 4419 |
| A | Many knights arm in preparation for a tournament. It is implied that Gawain arms at the same time. | 4954 |
| A | Gawain arms among other knights. | 5496 |
| A | Gawain is armed by a maiden. He uses a chessboard as a shield. | 5888 |
| - | <i>Shift back to Perceval who is already armed.</i> | 6241 |
| D | To speak to a hermit in a chapel. | 6339 |
| A | Shift back to Gawain, who arms before meeting the man with the silver leg. | 7643 |
| D | Gawain disarmed by a number of youths in a town. | 7892 |
| A | Men fetch Gawain's arms before he sets out. | 8361 |
| D | Gawain disarmed by a group of ladies. <i>This is the last dis/arming act before the romance ends incomplete.</i> | 8996 |

*Disarmings resulting from combat

**Symbolic dis/arming acts

Note: Both Perceval and his Gawain dis/arm eighteen times in the 8961 extant lines of poetry, an average of one dis/arming act every 498 lines.

Table 5: An inventory of Lancelot's arming/disarming acts in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*:

| Arming (A) or Disarming (D) | Scene | Line Ref. |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| A | Lancelot enters the narrative armed. | 317 |
| D | Before entering the Forbidden Bed. | 446 |
| A | Departing the hall of the Forbidden Bed in pursuit of the Queen. | 583 |
| D | In the house of the Amorous Hostess. | 1000 |
| A | Leaving the house of the Amorous Hostess. | 1283 |
| D | In the house of the vavasour by the Stony Passageway. | 2066 |
| A | Leaving the house of the vavasour. | 2193 |
| D | At the knight's manor. | 2534 |
| A | For combat with the Proud Knight. | 2655 |
| D | After killing the Proud Knight. | 2945 |
| A | Leaving the house of another vavasour. | 2987 |
| D | At the Sword Bridge. | 3095 |
| A | For the first combat with Meleagant. | 3536 |
| D* | During combat with Meleagant. | 3612 |
| - | <i>Lengthy interlude wherein Lancelot and the Queen are reconciled.</i> | - |
| A | For the second combat with Meleagant. | 4956 |
| - | <i>It is implied that he is disarmed before being jailed.</i> | - |
| A | In the red armor before the tournament. | 5503 |
| D | Upon resting before the tournament. | 5530 |
| - | <i>His arming for the tournament occurs "offstage."</i> | - |
| D | After the tournament. | 6028 |
| A** | Imprisonment in Meleagant's tower. | 6099 |
| D** | Escape from the tower. | 6620 |
| A | For the third combat with Meleagant. | 6908 |
| D* | During combat with Meleagant. | 7055 |
| D | After combat with Meleagant. | 7095 |

*Disarmings resulting from combat

**Symbolic dis/arming act

Note: Many more scenes of dis/arming exist throughout the poems but these inventories represent only those dealing specifically with Chrétien's protagonists. Dis/arming acts can also be implied without being narrated but I have kept to those clearly depicted within the narratives. There is also more work to be done on the implied presence of squires or valets who aid in arming/disarming acts but I have kept strictly to the literal language. The counts and line references included here are based on digital word searches of Pierre Kuntzmann's transcriptions of Chrétien's works, available via the Université d'Ottawa: <<http://atilf.atilf.fr/scripts/>>.

Chapter 2

Productive Labor and Armorial discourses in the Gawain Romances

This chapter examines the reception and evolution of armorial discourses in two late-medieval Gawain romances as occurring in parallel with the enhancement and even replacement of the mail hauberk with custom-built plate armor, one of the most significant developments in military technology during the late Middle Ages. The increased complexity of both the construction and use of armor bears an important influence on chivalric representation in romance narratives. Armor was no longer a uniform mass of nonspecific rings but rather a collage of crafted metal surfaces with components custom-made for each individual part of the chivalric body. Compared to mail, the late-medieval plate armor depicted in romance narratives insists far more strongly on its *thingness*.¹ In the twelfth-century romances of Chrétien de Troyes, dis/arming acts figure as structural markers but are relatively undetailed. In later romances, written when plate armor began to outperform mail on the battlefield, chivalric matter becomes more capable of agency and actively participates in articulating the identity of the chivalric subject, especially in the attention plate armor draws to the methods of its production. A single ring of mail does not differentiate itself from the rest of the rings that make up the twelfth-century knight's hauberk, but a dented breastplate or

¹ I refer here to Bill Brown's conception of the story of the *thing* as a term that "names less an object than a particular subject-object-relation." "Thing Theory," *Things*, (Bill Brown ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 4.

a torn gauntlet draws our gaze to the destruction and construction of specific armorial objects. The focused structural and descriptive attention given to armor in the late Middle English Gawain romances represents, I argue, an important layering of armorial discourses. These layered discourses are directly engaged with the technological and cultural shifts occurring in the forge and on the battlefield during the development of the English romance tradition. The early sixteenth-century Middle Scots poem *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* best exemplifies romance's material engagement with these later armorial technologies. In its depiction of armor and its use on the battlefield, *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* participates in a form of armorial discourses that actively links chivalric and artisanal social classes and demonstrates the genre's interest in social productivity. In this way, *Gologras* far outstrips the more critically-attended but chivalrically un-productive *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. This chapter compares the ways in which these two Gawain romances engage with medieval armorial discourses and exposes a periodizing critical preference for a romance that, despite its poetic quality, is ultimately unrepresentative of the genre.

The Advent of Plate Armor

At the center of my reading of these two Gawain romances is an important shift in armorial technology that reveals an equally important literary and material difference between the mail-clad knight in Chrétien's twelfth-century romances and the increasingly plate-clad heroes of the following centuries. In the discussion that follows I detail the development of plate armor to its extreme point in the fifteenth century. It is important to

note, however, that both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* depict a transitional stage between mail and plate. As these romances make clear, even the inclusion of the earliest plate-armor elements like breastplates or greaves still dramatically alters the depiction of chivalric subjects and the ways in which they are understood with respect to medieval armorial discourses.

Historians of warfare often cite the increased use of ranged weapons of war as heralding the shift from mail armor to plate. Whereas mail had been effective protection against close-range cutting and stabbing weapons like swords and spears, the increased use of longbows and crossbows in medieval warfare after the thirteenth century necessitated armor more resistant to high-velocity penetration.² What had made mail effective in the past was its uniformity of coverage. Historian John Clements identifies a sharp shift in sword design between the eras of mail and plate. For fighting plate, a sword needed to be stiff and sharp to deliver a forceful penetrating blow. To fight mail, swords were designed to be broad and flexible, designed to deliver a blow on the cutting edge more than the point.³ A sword striking a mail hauberk in a chopping or slashing motion would contact a number of steel rings in different places, distributing the force of the blow across a wide area.⁴ While such a strike might succeed in cutting a few links from

²Alan Williams, "The Blast Furnace and the Mass Production of Armour Plate," *History of Technology* 16 (1994): 100-101.

³John Clements, *Medieval Swordsmanship: Illustrated Methods and Technique* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1998), 53.

⁴These types of strikes were far more common in practical warfare since they could more reliably incapacitate through blunt force than a sword thrust, which was more likely to miss and less likely to incapacitate.

the hauberk, the thickness of the padded gambeson underneath as well as the loose construction of the hauberk itself served to absorb most of the sword's power, leaving the hauberk functionally intact, aside from an impact-sized hole. Mail was even effective against sword thrusts since individual rings could catch the point of a sword before it penetrated to a lethal depth. This is not to say that such a strike did not injure the knight. In fact, most of the injuries sustained in this type of combat were a matter of blunt force rather than corporeal penetration. Though damaging to the body beneath, such blows would not have impacted the outward chivalric image.

The literature contains very few examples of practical proofing of medieval equipment and hardly any go beyond what Barry Molloy calls the “whack it and see” method.⁵ Weapons enthusiast and Youtuber ThegnThrand has produced a series of such “whack it and see” demonstrations which, though decidedly unscientific, still offer some useful case-studies on the interaction of medieval-style armor and weapons.⁶ In testing a reproduction mail hauberk against both thrusts and slashing strokes by a reproduction shortsword, ThegnThrand observes with some surprise that, while a few rings are cut from the hauberk the blade only damages the gambeson beneath on an exceptionally

⁵ Even Molloy's approach seems like a scholarly excuse for the activities of a Society for Creative Anachronism enthusiast: Barry Molloy, "Martial arts and materiality: a combat archaeology perspective on Aegean swords of the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries BC," (*World Archaeology* 40.1 2008), 118.

⁶ Despite the informality of the format, I am encouraged by ThegnThrand's insistence on the use of historically-accurate mail for demonstrations like these. ThegnThrand, "Stop Using Modern Butted Chainmail for Historical Maille Testing," (Youtube video, 11:16, Posted [March 2016], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xw3lGIAwLk&index=9&list=WL>).

powerful stroke.⁷ Even in such cases, the overall surface of the mail hauberk remains relatively whole. As mentioned previously, the methods of these demonstrations are crude but sufficient to demonstrate that the uniform components of mail represent one of its most significant functional assets.

The gross force of a sword thrust or slash was limited in comparison to the focused force delivered by an arrow shot from an English longbow. Mere shock absorption was not enough to stop arrowheads small enough to squeeze mail links or fired with enough speed and force to burst a mail rivet and continue on through the body of the mail-clad knight. Whereas a slashing sword might burst a link or two and yet not damage the knight terribly, an arrow need only break a single link to impale the wearer of mail. Despite the belief among many medieval knights that archers fought without honor, their effectiveness in penetrating the defenses of armed knights made their use essential to victory on the late-medieval battlefield.⁸ As the prevalence of ranged weapons increased in the warfare of the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, so too did the technology to combat them. The plates of polished steel that began to cover chivalric bodies were smooth enough to redirect and shed indirect blows and hard and thick enough to withstand the focused power of an arrow or sword point at full-force. Still,

⁷ ThegnThrand, “Can Medieval Swords and Axes Cut Chainmail or Maille armor?,” (Youtube video, 13:11, Posted [May 2016], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXjzSv2q_LY&t=14s).

⁸ Charles Ashdown cites the English longbow specifically as having been integral to the English victories at Crécy in 1346, Poitiers in 1356, and Agincourt in 1415. Charles H. Ashdown, *Armour & Weapons in the Middle Ages* (London: The Holland Press, 1925/1975).

despite the increased protection it offered, plate armor was significantly more complicated to produce and wear, and the plate-clad knight accordingly embodied a much more complex and culturally-layered armorial assemblage than his mail-clad predecessor.⁹

It will be important here to qualify what I mean by “plate-clad” since the components and design of armor was constantly evolving from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. No single specimen of plate armor best exemplifies the technology. Suits of plate armor, at least those designed for the fighting nobility, were almost always made-to-order and were accordingly unique in most cases.¹⁰ While the mail links of the twelfth-century hauberk were interlocked and multiplied a thousandfold over the knight’s whole body like a single garment, plate armor was a matter of individual components. A woodcut in William Caxton’s 1483 printing of Jacobus de Cessolus’s *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* offers a popular conception of the way a plate-armored knight would have appeared in the fifteenth century, when the technology was at its peak (Figure 3).¹¹ A brief inventory of the necessary components of armed knighthood accompanies this image:

The knight ought to be made al armed upon an hors in suche wise that he have an helme on his heed and a spere in his right hond & coverid with his shelde, a swerd & a mace on his lyft syde clad with an haberk & plates

⁹ Alan Williams describes plate armor as reaching its zenith in the fifteenth century. Williams, “The Blast Furnace,” 101.

¹⁰ Williams, “The Blast Furnace,” 101.

¹¹ The introduction and proliferation of guns and gunpowder into European warfare after the fifteenth century gradually rendered most armor, even plate, obsolete

tofore his breste. legge harnoys on his legges spoors on his heelis on hys handes hys gauntelettes.

[The knight ought to be armed and set upon a horse in this way: that he have a helm on his head, a spear in his right hand, a shield covering him, equipped with a sword and a mace on his left side, that he be clad with a hauberk and plates before his breast, leg harness on his legs, spurs on his heels, and on his hands, his gauntlets.]¹²

Not included in the printed text but clearly visible in the image are the lamellar rerebrace (on the upper-arm), couter (elbow), tasset (upper-thigh), cuisse (thigh), poleyn (knee), and sabaton (foot). *The Game and the Playe of the Chesse* is no romance. The book itself is an exploration of the medieval social strata imagined through the lens of the abstract board game, but such a description indicates the persistence of armorial discourses in the popular conception of knighthood. The image itself does not necessarily depict a battle-ready knight but most likely a contemporary idealization based on tournament armor, but it still serves to illustrate one version of the material realities of late-medieval chivalry. Despite the appearance of wholeness suggested by the suits of armor we commonly see in museums, each component of the plate armor assemblage was girded and attached separately, producing a chivalric body composed of a multitude of discrete surfaces that cover, slide over, rotate around, and crash against each other.¹³

¹² Jacobus de Cessolus, *The holy apostle*, C4^v. Modernizations are mine.

¹³ Carolyn Springer notes that museums are commonly unable to display full suits of armor since few exist intact. Instead, many assemble their displays from incomplete suits with passable similarities that allow them to be displayed together as singular suits. Carolyn Springer, *Armour and Masculinity in the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 4.

As a result of the crafted contours and stiffness of these individual objects, the body of the knight was no longer the sole superstructure of the chivalric appearance. With mail, the knight's shoulders supported most of the armor's weight and his limbs governed the shape of its "fabric." The components of plate, on the other hand, were distributed throughout the body and attached individually to limbs or other components of the assemblage. While this made plate armor much more complicated to arm, it was much easier to wear since its weight was distributed more evenly throughout the knight's body. This also meant that the knight could wear *more* armor, obscuring the body beneath a layer of metal that merely represented it. In this, the armor itself became capable of supporting, shaping, projecting, and even performing an identity that previously been limited by basic anatomy. As Carolyn Springer argues in her readings of Italian Renaissance armor, much of the contouring offered by plate armor served to enhance the knight's masculine signification. Citing the sixteenth-century introduction of exaggerated phallic elements into suits of plate, Springer asserts that "armour could more generally be viewed as a metonymic expansion of the codpiece, since its relationship with the underlying anatomy is equally ambiguous."¹⁴ Anne Hollander similarly comments that plate armor enhanced male bodies "with an invented abstract imagery of multifaceted brilliance and unearthly-looking strength," even contrasting it to mail, "which hung straight down like fabric, only heavily and doubtless painfully."¹⁵ The plate-clad knight

¹⁴ Springer, *Armour and Masculinity*, 82.

¹⁵ Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 43.

was no longer held to the limits of his flesh but could adopt equipment that exaggerated, created, or even performed an entire identity. In plate armor, the knight could do more than simply change his color, like Erec, Cligés, and Lancelot in Chrétien's work.

Through armorial craft, it could imply greater size, strength, wealth, etc. than the knight's body would ever have been capable in a mail hauberk, no matter how finely crafted. As many generic museum displays of hollow yet fully-assembled armor might suggest, in the era of plate armor the presence of the chivalric body itself becomes less essential to chivalric signification. Instead, the outer metal plates of an armorial assemblage, what Springer calls "the literal surfaces of visual culture," are as far as the critical gaze can penetrate and thus come to embody chivalric signification without requiring an actual body.¹⁶ In this sense, plate armor and its efficacy embodied the ideal of knighthood far more than the man himself.

Chivalric and Artisanal Labor

In contrast to mail, plate armor was much more physically capable of representing its craftsmanship and provenance, since its flat surfaces could retain the identifying marks of individual armorers, and since many of the stylistic aspects of a suit's contours indicated regional fashions.¹⁷ Thus, the identity of the fabricator became enmeshed with

¹⁶ Hollander, *Sex and Suits*, 77.

¹⁷ Charles ffoulkes, *The Armourer and His Craft from the XIth to the XVIth Century*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1988), 147-151, 71. ffoulkes catalogs one hundred four of these marks but also notes that no surviving European mail demonstrate such marks.

the identity of the wearer, making the armor itself an active participant in the work of social construction. In his exploration of inorganic agency in “The Sex Life of Stone,” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen suggests that “stones exert forces that in cooperation with human bodies change what is possible [...] they are also frequent incitements to transformation.”¹⁸ Cohen here refers to how medieval lapidarian Albertus Magnus describes a stone called *gerachidem* as capable of protecting humans from wasps and bees.¹⁹ Itself an inorganic substance like steel or iron, this stone effectively operates with and around human bodies as a form of protection, acting in much the same way and with a similar inorganic agency as armor demonstrates in chivalric narratives. *Gerachidem* becomes a *thing* because it has been mobilized for use by human hands. In his more expansive study of lithic-human relationships in *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, Cohen further postulates that “lithic materiality becomes active—becomes capable of *protecting*, igniting, drawing, or emitting.”²⁰ The inhuman, in this sense, is capable of materializing just as much active agency as the human. Cohen also notes that sculpted stone collaborates with the human in the act of creation. A work of stone sculpture like Stonehenge, for example, is “a collaboration of artistic forces, human and geological.”²¹

Even if some specimens of mail had survived from before the thirteenth century, the basic construction of mail made identifying its provenance nearly impossible.

¹⁸ Jeffrey J. Cohen, “The Sex Life of Stone.” *From Beasts to Souls: Gender and Embodiment in Medieval Europe*, (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 29.

¹⁹ Cohen, “The Sex Life of Stone,” 29.

²⁰ Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 217-8. Emphasis mine.

²¹ Cohen, *Stone*, 107.

This collaboration involves the participation of both the inhuman material and the human artisan, much like the production and use of the weapons of war. The knight on the battlefield and the armorer in the forge are simultaneously shaped by and participate in the shaping of metal. This participation renders metal, artisanal bodies, and chivalric bodies as all part of the same associational assemblage.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, upon whom Cohen draws heavily, similarly comment on the correspondence between weapons and tools. In their discussion of the War Machine, Deleuze and Guattari note:

A distinction can always be made between weapons and tools on the basis of their usage (destroying people or producing goods). But although this extrinsic distinction explains certain secondary adaptations of a technical object, it does not preclude a general convertibility between the two groups, to the extent that it seems very difficult to propose an intrinsic difference between weapons and tools.²²

In the sense that they are both the manufactured materials of war, armor fits into the same category as weapons within this particular flow. Weapons and armor, which are part and parcel of the war machine, are not separate from but on a continuum with tools. In the same sense, the armorer who beats and shapes metal into plate and plate into armor is a precursor to the knight, who continues to beat and (un)shape the very same metal by ballistic percussion.

This connection between knight and armorer is not merely mercantile. Rather, as a function of the knight's regular disintegration, the occupations of the knight and the

²² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Brian Massumi, (London: Athlone Press, 1988), 395.

armorers represent a form of social symbiosis. Despite his near-universal absence from medieval romance, the armorer would have been an essential companion to the traveling knight, nearly as important as the squire who armed him (often similarly absent in romance). Since, as the romances from Chrétien demonstrate, much of the labor of knighthood involved the disintegration of chivalric equipment, it would have been essential for the knight on a long campaign to travel with someone capable of repairing it.²³ In his discussion of the individual pawns on the chessboard, Jacobus de Cessolis outlines the social significance of the smith, noting:

hit apperteneth to the knyghtes to hane brydellys sadellis spores and many other thynges maad by the hands of smythes and ought to holde an hamer in his right hond and in his lift hande a squyer

[it appertains to the knyghts to have bridles, saddles, spurs, and many other things made by the hands of smiths and he ought to hold a hammer in his right hand and in his left hand a square.]²⁴

This chapter of *Chesse* goes on to describe the smith as any laborer who works with metal, stone, and even wood, but the opening example and the equipment depicted in the woodcut privilege an artisanal connection to knighthood. The absence of a woodworker's awl or saw or a mason's chisel and the presence of the mallet, anvil, forge, and tongs in the woodcut clearly indicate the metalworker (Figure 8).²⁵



Figure 8: the Smith from Caxton's *Chesse*

²³ ffoulkes, *The Armourer and his Craft*, 112.

²⁴ Jacobus de Cessolus, *The holy apostle*, E6^v. Modernization mine.

²⁵ Jacobus de Cessolus, *The holy apostle*, E6^v.

Even Jacobus' description of the smith's social significance indicates his integration into chivalric sociopolitical structures.²⁶ Thus the knight was not only corporeally attached to his armor but part of a social assemblage that also incorporates members of the working class. According to Lisa H. Cooper, "the formal procedures by which artisans were made legible to medieval readers not only participated in history, but have in turn a history worth writing."²⁷ In many ways medieval romance helps reveal this history despite the typical courtly and aristocratic associations with the genre. While armorers are practically invisible in romance narratives, their presence is felt through both the product of their labor and the manner in which the labor itself is echoed in the labor of the knight. In the work they perform upon armor, the knight and the armorer not only emphasize their close relationship but also call attention to the larger labor of cultural assemblage.

In the previous chapter I discussed at length the productive potential for assembling as well as disassembling bodies. Chrétien's romances put a similar emphasis on the ways chivalric combatants quite literally work the metal of their opponent's gear, disassembling it through the rise and fall of concussive strikes that also somehow forge social bonds and solidify political sovereignties. This form of physical exertion represents the most concentrated form of chivalric work. In a close parallel to the manual labor of the craftsman or artisan, the chivalric subject labors by striking physical matter and

²⁶ The smith is the second pawn in Jacobus' hierarchy, preceded by the "workman," a category which includes farming, among other employments.

²⁷ Lisa H Cooper, *Artisans and Narrative Craft in Late Medieval England*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 15.

changing its shape, the only difference being that the material worked upon by the knight contains another body. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Lancelot's use of the laborer's "malle" to escape from Meleagant's tower forges a clear connection between chivalric labor and that of a mason or smith. Lancelot escapes only by substituting his sword for the stoneworker's tool while still assaulting what is essentially a worked surface designed to protect the body within.²⁸ In this, the knight becomes a kind of artisan, crossing the boundaries of social class and occupying a continuum with the laborer responsible for crafting the materials of his chivalric identity, the armorer. Both the knight and the armorer strike blows upon armor, and though the labor of their respective professions would seem at cross purposes, the parallels between them are uncanny.

Understanding the imagery of the armorer's forge first requires an explanation of medieval metallurgical production. The fifteenth-century metallurgist Vannoccio Biringuccio describes the work of the ironsmith as exceedingly laborious. Throughout the workday, this smith:

continually moves his body, now thrusting the iron into the heart of the fire with large thick tongs, now removing it to look at it and to put sand, tuff, or other earth over it, now putting on fresh charcoal, now moistening and slowing down the fire, and now cleaning it. Finally, while the iron is hot he strikes with powerful mallets and heavy hammers, as you see, and brings it to whatever end he wishes to make of the work.²⁹

²⁸ The Smith holds such a "malle" or mallet in Figure 6. Jacobus de Cessolus places the mason in the same artisanal category as the blacksmith.

²⁹ Vannoccio Biringuccio, *Pirotechnia*, Cyril Stanley Smith and Martha Teach Gnudi trans., (Cambridge, MA and London, UK: The M.I.T. Press, 1966), 370

Biringuccio's sympathetic description also emphasizes the centrality of the ironsmith's tools, namely the furnace and the hammer. In medieval metallurgy, the iron or steel used to make armor was produced by burning iron ore in a furnace or kiln until all non-metal material known as slag was burned or melted away. This produced a misshapen hunk of metal known as a bloom.³⁰ The bloom, what Biringuccio calls the "masseli," would then be reheated until soft enough to work (usually when the bloom began to glow bright red) and then hammered into whichever shape was needed for the project.³¹ Plate armor, for example, required a flat sheet and thus much more hammering than most other metallurgical applications. This hammering was no simple process and required significant repetition of the armorer's mallet-strike before the metal was flat and thin enough to work into a piece of plate armor.³² Before the introduction of the pre-industrial blast furnace, which decreased the appearance of impurities in raw steel and iron, the hammering or "plating" process of flattening raw iron or steel also helped to purify the metal.³³ As the impure bloom was struck, the excretion of impurities caused showers of sparks to fly from the worked surface. The more the bloom was pounded into a workable

³⁰ Williams, *The Knight and the Blast Furnace*, 4.

³¹ Biringuccio, *Pirotechnia*, 63.

³² In his extensive measurements of extant pieces of medieval and early modern armor, Williams notes that an average breastplate would have been about three millimeters thick. This number increased in the sixteenth century with the prevalence of guns on the battlefield. Alan Williams, *The Knight and the Blast Furnace: A History of the Metallurgy of Armour in the Middle Ages & the Early Modern Period*, (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2003), 913-917.

³³ Modern blacksmith Richard Furrer observes the importance of this excretion while fashioning his own version of an historical sword. *Secrets of the Viking Sword*, Directed by Peter Yost (NOVA, 2012), Television.

shape fewer sparks would shoot out until ultimately the previously misshapen hunk of raw and impure metal became an ingot that could be crafted. For a twelfth-century armorer, the helmet was the only piece of chivalric equipment that would have been made of hammered plate (see Figure 7). The wire used to make mail was drawn rather than forged and the links themselves were closed by a precise strike to flatten a rivet.³⁴ The process of fabricating armor changed significantly as the demand for plate increased, specifically in the amount of hammering it involved.³⁵ Working with plate required the heavy and repeated impact of the mallet and occupied considerably more time for the armorer than shaping flattened plate into armorial components.³⁶ Most other operations would be performed while the metal was cool or at least cooler than it had been during the blooming and plating process. These techniques involved softer, more precise strikes upon curved anvils or other shaping tools to create flutings, add hinges, close rivets, and craft most other functional and ornamental additions to the armorial assemblage.

Most of the metalworker's labor is centered around the raising and striking of the hammer, a motion not unlike that of the knight in combat, what I call the "productive strike." This denotes the basic physical movement of the raised arm holding a tool (or

³⁴ Ashdown notes that some sources claim that the wire-drawing technique was invented in 1306 but admits that this may simply attest to a popularization of a much older technique. Some wire might have been forged (i.e. beaten into wire with a mallet) but we have no evidence to verify this. Ashdown, *Armour & Weapons*, 41.

³⁵ The demand for cheap, light arms for the infantry that slowly replaced the singular mounted warrior required much higher yields for ore extraction than a bloom furnace could produce. The pre-industrial blast furnace met this need: Williams, *The Knight and the Blast Furnace*, 877.

³⁶ ffoulkes, *The Armourer and His Craft*, 22.

weapon) and descending to deliver ballistic force. When performed by an armorial agent in medieval romance, this strike is capable of both material and cultural fabrication. The physical and symbolic similarities in the productive strokes of both armorer and knight further suggests a process of continued purification and not simply an ultimately destructive practice. The armorer is not the last person to strike a suit of armor; the basic function of armor is to protect the wearer from the blows of his adversaries' weapons. In the reading that follows I challenge the assumption that such strikes are inherently destructive. Rather, their resemblances to those of the armorer in their ability to shape the metal they hit denote *productive* strikes. Few romances best exemplify this materiality of armorial manufacture than *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*.

The Armorer and the Productive Strike in *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*

The Middle Scots romance *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* (hereafter *Gologras*) exists in a single printing from 1508 (STC 11984) and is thought to have been written in the late fifteenth century.³⁷ Thomas Hahn aptly calls it “the single richest and most impressive romance of arms and battle that survives from late medieval Britain.”³⁸

³⁷ Kristin Boviard-Abbo develops an historicist reading of the poem's representation of political borders to date the poem's composition a full century later than had been previously held, but no definitive evidence exists: "Reirdit on ane riche roche beside ane riveir": Martial Landscape and James IV of Scotland in *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawane*," *Neophilologus* 98 (2014): 676.

³⁸Thomas Hahn, "Introduction: *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*," Thomas Hahn ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 227.

Though this romance demonstrates a deep engagement with armorial discourses, the poem's chivalric materiality has not yet been addressed by scholarship thus far. *Gologras* does not contain the type or frequency of arming acts that frame the episodic structural transitions we see in Chrétien's romances, but armor itself is referenced directly over thirty times in 1,368 lines of poetry (roughly, every 44 lines). Some of these mentions are brief inventories, such as when Gologras' men are described:

In greis and garatouris, grathit full gay,
Sevyne score of scheildis thai schew at ane sicht.
Ane helme set to ilk scheild, siker of assay,
With fel lans on loft, lemand ful light.

[In greaves and sashes, dressed beautifully,
Seven-score shields they showed all at once.
One helm set to each shield, tried and true,
With sharp lance raised, gleaming very bright]³⁹

Such descriptions serve to situate chivalric equipment as central to our understanding of the poem's multitudinous chivalric subjects. Other instances make metonymic mentions of these subjects by referring to them not as men or knights but as "beirnis" or "beirnys."⁴⁰ In context the word refers to fighting men, but its frequent proximity to "birneis," a term variously spelled "brinie," "birny," "byrnie" that was often used

³⁹ *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawane*, Ralph Hanna ed. (Suffolk, UK: The Scottish Text Society, 2008), 485-487. Note that Hanna uses the Middle Scots spellings of the two protagonists' names as printed in the 1508 edition by Chepman and Myllar. Excepting citations of Hanna's edition, I use the modernized spellings throughout.

⁴⁰ *Gologras*, 204, 524, 610, 688, 1165.

synonymously with “hauberk” in Middle English, allows a semantic and thematic elision of the two, especially when both are targets of violent attack:⁴¹

Thay *beirnys* in the bataill
Sa bauldly thai baid.
Thai bet on sa bremly, thai *beirnys* on the bent,
Bristis *birneis* with brandis burnist ful bene.

[The *men* in the battle
So boldly they endured!
They beat on so fiercely, those *men* on the field,
Bursting *hauberks* with brightly-burnished swords.]⁴²

Poetic constructions like these blur the line between the men and their hauberks, and we cannot be sure which is doing the beating or which is being beaten. While the effects of metonymy are intriguing, *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* engages most significantly with armorial discourses through the imagery of metallurgical manufacture.

The narrative of *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* centers around an attempt by King Arthur to maintain and expand his kingdom. While returning from the crusades, Arthur happens upon two castles. The lord of the first castle willingly offers Arthur and his knights respite. Gologras, the lord of the second castle, refuses to bow to Arthur’s authority and the king responds by preparing a siege. Gologras responds by proposing that the conflict be resolved through courtly combat. The bulk of the ensuing narrative relates a series of six combats involving no fewer than twenty-five individual knights. As Kristin Boviard-Abbo has noted, the structure of these combats more closely

⁴¹ “brinie,” *Middle English Dictionary*, University of Michigan, 23 April 2013. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Awyntyrs off Arthure* also use this term.

⁴² *Golagros*, 689-691. Emphasis mine.

resembles that of a tournament than a true military siege.⁴³ While the tournament structure is strictly governed by a system of tallied victories and defeated knights captured for ransom, the imagery of the armorer's forge is central to mediating this armed conflict. This imagery of forging appears in three distinct categories: the language of labor in which the impact of swords is narrated not merely as violence but as also work, a singular focus on the elements of armor as the object of this labor, and the visual imagery of percussive impact that figures armor and sword as analogous to raw steel and mallet.

The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain contains six separate combats, all of which proceed through the language of labor (for a full inventory, see Table 6). The poet draws frequently on words like "hewit" [hewed] (seven times) and "bet" [beat] (five times) to describe the impact of swords upon armor. Both of these words evoke not only the strength of the violent action but also reference other forms of labor in which things are hacked or beaten as a productive exercise. "Bet" in particular, aside from describing sword blows, is also used in *Gologras* to refer to the hammered or "beaten" gold ornaments on clothing and heraldic gear.⁴⁴ Gawain's combat with Gologras further confuses the labor of combat and that of the goldsmith when Gawain "Betit doune the bright gold and beryallis about" [beat down the bright gold and beryls about.]⁴⁵ The word

⁴³ Boviard-Abbo, "Martial Landscape and James IV of Scotland in *The Knightly Tale of Golagros and Gawane*," 683.

⁴⁴ *Golagros*, 318. Even when referring to decorative metallurgy, the poem's descriptions are tellingly tied to methods of production. In this case "beaten" gold would contrast from a casting, a method of metallurgical craftsmanship involving a clay mold into which molten metal was poured.

⁴⁵ *Golagros*, 992.

Table 6: An Inventory of the Metallurgical Imagery of Combat in *Gologras*

| Arthur's Knights | Gologras' Knights | Combat line ref. | Armorial Imagery |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gaudifeir | Galiot* | 565-572 | “Hewit on the hard steil” “birny and breistplade” |
| Raunald** | Rigal of Rone** | 620-637 | “the strakis war sa strang!” “Aither berne braithly bet with ane bright brand” “hewit on hard steil, hartly with hand” |
| Lyonel* Ewin Bedwar* Gyromal- ance | Louys Edmond* * Bantellas Sanguel* | 679-715 | “freschly thai fure, as fyre out of flynt” “buskit to battle with birny and brand / Thair riche birnys thai bet derfly with dynt” “Thai bet on sa brymly, thai beirnys on the bent” “Bristis birneis with brandis burnist ful bene” “Ryngis of rank steill rattillit and rent” “Wirkand woundis full wyde with wapnis of ware / Helmys of hard steill thai hatterit and heuch” “Burnis blades of steill throw birneis thay bere” “Throw platis of polist steill their poyntis can pase” |
| Cador of Cornwall Owales* Iwell* Myreot | Agalus* Ewmond Mychin Meligor Hew* | 755-767 | “Braidit out brandis, on birnys thai bet / As fyre that fleis fra the flynt, thy fechtin sa fast” |
| Kay | Unnamed opponent* | 846-864 | “Thair mailyeis with melle thay merkit in the medis” “breistplait and birneis” “sparkis flaw in the field, as fyre out of flynt” |
| Gawain* | Gologras | 915-1027 | “hewit on hard steill” “With ane bitand brand” “Throw birny and breistplait and bordour it baid” “Mony mailye and plait was marrit on the mold” “He leit fle to the freke, as fyre out of flynt / He hewit on with grete haist, hartly with hand, / Hakkit throw the hard weid, to the hede hynt” “Wraithly wrought” |

*Defeated/Captured

**Slain

“wrought” similarly crosses the boundaries between descriptions of chivalric blows and the workmanship apparent on objects like armor, clothing, and architectural features.⁴⁶ Even the word “wirk” is associated with the physical labor performed by fighting knights while also evoking the artisanally-produced object. This language of labor in *Gologras* rescripts what might otherwise be considered the destructive violence of chivalric combat, articulating it instead as a form of craftsmanship that reveals both the labor of the warriors in this battle and the full continuum of the war machine, as Deleuze and Guattari describe it above. In this sense, the object being worked upon also becomes a significant participant in this labor.

No fewer than twenty-five knights engage in chivalric combat in *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*, each of whom is fully outfitted in armor (also inventoried in Table 6). Some of these knights are injured and a few are even killed but the poet pays very little attention to the corporeal circumstances of these defeats and instead localizes almost all of the narrative’s violence on the knights’ protective surfaces. As Gaudifeir and Galiot meet on the battlefield: “Out with swerdis thai swang fra thair schalk side. / Thairwith wraithly thai *wirk*, thai wourthy in wedis, / *Hewit* on the *hard steil*, and hurt thame in the hide” [The knight’s swung with the swords from their sides. / Then wrathfully they worked, those worthy men in armor, / Hewed on the hard steel, and hurt

⁴⁶ For example: a wall is well “wrought” on line 64, weapons are well “wrought” for war on line 463, a shield is described as having been “wrought all of weir” on line 530, and in engaging each other, two combatants “wraightly wrought” on line 1017.

each other in the hide.]⁴⁷ It is not the body of the knight that is “hewit” but the “hard steil,” almost as if the armor is the primary target rather than the knight or his body. Similarly, in the first of the two large melee combats: “the wyis *wroght* uthir grete wandreth and weuch, / *Wirkand* woundis full wyde with wapnis of were. / Helmys of *hard steill* thai *hatterit and heuch*” [The warriors wrought upon each other great distress and sorrow / Working wide wounds with weapons of war. / Helms of hard steel they battered and hewed.]⁴⁸ It would be simple to assume that the knights themselves are the objects of this violence but the results of these swords’ impacts are not measured on the knight’s bodies but on their armor. The only armorial objects mentioned specifically in these lines are the hard steel of the knights’ helms. Arguably, the wounds being “wirkand” [worked] here are not gashes in the knights’ flesh but the marks of impact on plates and mail, as if the knights were merely continuing the work of the armorer responsible for producing their equipment. This focuses the narrative solely on the materials engaged in ballistic percussion and blurs the line between armorial disintegration and manufacture, making these moments of violence seem less like the progressive destruction of knightly bodies as their participation in productive metallurgical labor.

⁴⁷ Golagros, 565-567. Emphasis mine. Thomas Hahn glosses “hide” as “skin” but the word could just as easily refer to the leather of the arming doublet (Golagros, Hahn ed. 562-564). Charles Ffoulkes cites the prevalent use of “cuir-bouilli” or boiled leather armor in tournament settings, even identifying it as part of Sir Thopas’ gear in Chaucer’s tale. Ffoulkes, *The Armorer and His Craft*, 97. This could also be comparable to the “fayre pelures” in Sir Gawain’s gear: Sir Gawain, 2029.

⁴⁸ *Golagros*, 703-705. Emphasis mine.

The physical action of this labor on the field of combat does not only evoke the artisan's forge but its tools as well. In terms of physical motion, the knight's sword and the armorer's mallet share a similar use and physical trajectory: both are swung against armor with percussive force and both shape the metal they strike. The appearance of swords, often referred to as "bronds," and the work they help perform in *Gologras* emphasizes their connection to the imagery of forging. The word "brond" had been used to describe swords since before the Norman Conquest.⁴⁹ The first definition for "brond" in the *Middle English Dictionary* reveals the word's connection to fire: "Burning fuel, a fire or flame; a firebrand or torch."⁵⁰ This word is even used during both arming scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.⁵¹ In this sense, referring to a sword as a brand in combat narratives emphasized both its bright color, a sign of its forged strength and quality, and its heat, a sign of the fervor with which it is wielded.

Even without the use of this particular word we can draw clear connections between the sword and mallet as tools that work upon metal that are swung by skilled hands. The explosive moment of impact between swords and armor further highlights the association of chivalric combat with armorial manufacturing. As described above, each impact of the plater's mallet or hammer during the process of hammering an impure bloom

⁴⁹ It appears once in *Beowulf* in reference to the helmet that "brond nē beado-mēcas bītan ne meah-ton" [no sword or war-ax could ever bite through it.] *Beowulf*, Howell Chickering ed., (New York: Anchor Books, 2006), 1454. The MED lists Layamon's *Brut* as the first use of the word to refer to a sword in Middle English.

⁵⁰ "brānd," *Middle English Dictionary*, University of Michigan, 24 April 2013.

⁵¹ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon eds. Revised by Norman Davis (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1967), 588 ("bront"), 2032 ("bronde").

of steel or iron into workable plate would have produced an explosion of sparks. The appearance of this explosive imagery on the battlefield in *Gologras* indicates not simply a romanticization of chivalric prowess but the poet's engagement with the realities of armorial manufacture. For example, when Renaud and his unnamed opponent clash:

Athir berne braithly bet with ane bright brand;
On fute freschly thai frekis feghtin thai fang;
Thai hewit on hard steil, hartly with hand,
Quhil the spaldis and the sparkis spedely out sprang.

[Either knight fiercely beat the other with a bright sword;
On foot, those men found fresh fighting;
They hewed on hard steel, heartily with their hands,
While the splinters and the sparks sprang out speedily.]⁵²

This same imagery appears again when Kay collides with his unnamed opponent:

Thair mailyeis with melle thay merkit in the medis;
...
Thus thai faught upone fute, without fenyeing.
The sparkis flaw in the feild, as fyre out of flynt.

[Their mail they marked in the middle as if with mauls;
...
Thus they fought upon foot, truthfully
The sparks flew on the field like fire out of flint.]⁵³

The phrase "fyre out of flynt" appears thrice more in *Gologras*, each time in reference to the percussive impact of a weapon upon plate armor.⁵⁴ When mail is struck in *Gologras*, rings often go flying across the field but without any accompanying sparks; the impact of a sword upon plate is singularly capable of creating showers of sparks. The poet draws a

⁵² *Golagros*, 629-632.

⁵³ *Golagros*, 854-860.

⁵⁴ *Golagros*, 679, 761, 981.

comparison to a common method of starting fires by striking a piece of flint upon a piece of steel. Mechanically speaking, sparks are produced this way because flint is harder and more abrasive than steel. When the flint is struck upon a high-carbon steel surface, microscopic pieces of steel are shaved off and ignite from the heat produced by friction. Again, mechanically speaking, while this effect is possible when steel strikes steel, the smooth, polished steel of a finished suit of plate armor is far less likely to produce the shower of sparks the poet describes. Even a flint-and-steel firestarter creates only a few evanescent embers while the impact of a plater's mallet on a bloom of raw iron creates the kind of explosive display that would shower the ground with sparks.⁵⁵ The amount of mechanical force it would take to produce such a display with a sword swung against polished plate would be considerable and would only rarely have occurred during actual combat. In his attempt to emphasize the considerable strength of these knights blows, the *Gologras*-poet actually draws more readily upon the imagery of the forge than that of the battlefield.

It is important to recall that sparks like these would only have been produced during plating when the metal still contained impurities from the extraction process. During plating, these impurities would be worked out of the metal as it was hammered flat. In this sense, the imagery of sparks as a result of percussive impact in the poem suggests a purification of chivalric matter. Both combatants in a given chivalric combat

⁵⁵ Iron striking iron is even less likely to spark since steel is simply iron with a significantly higher carbon content.

actively contribute to each other's deconstruction; they work heavily upon the primary surface of their opponent's chivalric identities, their armor, and rather than simply enact a form of violent construction craft a space in which armor signifies more through its destruction than it had when whole and pristine. The sparks that fly from struck surfaces emphasize the strength with which the blow falls but do not insist on a distinction between the strike of the sword and the strike of the armorer's mallet. Though "thai hewit on hard steil, hartly with hand," this percussive force does not represent an undoing or an opposition to the armorer's labor, but occupies a continuum with it. Were an armorer to work the metal too much he would eventually cause it to disintegrate. Instead, the armorer only strikes until the metal is perfectly shaped and then ceases his labor; it is the knight who hastens armor's disintegration when he performs his own percussive strike.

Here we must draw a clear distinction between the destruction and disintegration of armor. Destruction suggests annihilation: the destroyed object would cease to be. Disintegration, on the other hand, suggests a disaggregation, that the disintegrating object loses internal cohesion and is reduced to its components, a disassemblage still capable of re-forming meaning. Similarly, the knights in *Gologras* do not deform something that the armorer has formed, but simply carry that work to an extreme boundary where the product is not material but political. In her examination of medieval laboring bodies, Kellie Robertson theorizes that material labor, like that performed by artisans and

craftsmen, became a frame for understanding the immaterial labor of clerical writing.⁵⁶

The connections thus forged between the laboring and praying estates, Roberson argues, articulated a model for the medieval body politic.⁵⁷ In light of the formulation of chivalric labor in *Gologras*, the ballistics of combat suggest a form of immaterial or perhaps anti-material labor, continuing artisanal labor to the point of material destruction while at the same time crafting the immaterial product of political cohesion.

At its core, *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* is a romance about political maintenance. The conflict is initiated in the first place by Gologras' unwillingness to be incorporated into the Round Table. Arthur's first emissary to Gologras' court delivers the King's demand for fealty saying, "Our seemly Sovereane hymself, forsuth, / will nocht cese Quhill he have frely fangit your frendschip to fest" [Our seemly Sovereign himself, forsooth, / will not cease until he has feely accepted your friendship in hand.]⁵⁸ Fiercely asserting the independence of his realm, Gologras replies, "If I, for obeisance or boist, to bondage me bynde, / I war wourthy to be / Hingit heigh on ane tre" [If I, for obeisance or boast, bind myself to bondage, / I would be worthy to be / Hung high on a tree.]⁵⁹ This rejection of incorporative policy is the impurity that Arthur must quite literally "bet" [beat] out of Gologras and his knights. The final combat between Gologras and Gawain mirrors each preceding combat with the disintegration of

⁵⁶ Kellie Robertson, *The Laborer's Two Bodies: Literary and Legal Productions in Britain, 1350-1500* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 39.

⁵⁷ Robertson, *The Laborer's Two Bodies*, 24.

⁵⁸ *Golagros*, 422-423.

⁵⁹ *Golagros*, 438-440.

“birny and breistplait,” and “sparkis [that] flew in the field,” and by allowing Gawain to “straik [Gologras] with ane steil brand” [strike Gologras with a steel sword.]⁶⁰ Gawain’s chivalric-artisanal labor is ultimately productive, however, since it results in a newly-forged kindship and the development of Arthur’s body politic. Gologras submits to Arthur, saying:

Sen wourschipfull Wawane has wonnyn to your handis
The senyory in governyng,
Cumly Conquerour and Kyng,
Heir mak I yow obeising, As liege lord of landis.

[Since honorable Gawain has won to your hands
The authority to govern,
Handsome Conqueror and King,
Here I submit to you, as liege lord of these lands.]⁶¹

At this point in the romance no traces of defiance or willed independence remain in Gologras or his knights. Even his people have acquiesced to Arthur’s authority, making the king’s release of Gologras’ allegiance in the last lines of the romance perfunctory. Though Arthur leaves Gologras and his people “Fre as I the first fand” [free as I first found you], the labor Arthur’s knights have performed upon Gologras and his knights has reshaped them into matter more apt to political assemblage.⁶² The work of Gawain’s “handis” compels Gologras to figure Gawain as the craftsman of this alliance. The hands being referred to in the quote above are Arthur’s and Gologras has mentioned the role of his own hands just a few lines prior, but as Arthur has yet to lift a finger in this conflict,

⁶⁰ *Golagros*, 967, 1004, 1021.

⁶¹ *Golagros*, 1322-1325.

⁶² *Golagros*, 1364.

the Gawain's hands serve as working surrogates of his king's. In this, *Gologras* offers a more widely-aware sense of cultural strata than is typically associated with courtly romance. Though the focus of the romance remains on its chivalric subjects, by incorporating the imagery of the forge, *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* also tells the story of artisanal contributions to political wholeness. Gawain is capable of producing an assembled political body only because the labor he performs on the metallic surfaces of knighthood incorporates the labor of the armorer, making this artisan an essential component of this wholeness.

Gologras's engagement with armorial discourses is clear and tangible. It accepts the trope of chivalric materiality established by Chrétien but offers the variation of mobilizing that discourse toward social representation; armor exists not only to define the knight but also to gesture at the interconnectedness of knights, the chivalric subjects that have become popular figureheads of medieval culture, and the artisans who had been previously hidden behind the amorphous, uniform fabric of the hauberk. *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain* demonstrates a socially productive engagement with armorial discourses consistent with established conventions of medieval romance, an engagement that is wholly undermined by its more critically-attended cousin *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Making Armor Redundant in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

The fourteenth-century Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (hereafter *Sir Gawain*) has long enjoyed a prominent reputation in both medieval studies

and in undergraduate classrooms as the canonical example of the romance genre. This reputation is largely due to the poem's precise structural balance and complex symbolism, details which many critics claim are governed by a central icon: Gawain's heraldic pentangle. *Sir Gawain* offers an intriguing compliment to the structurally-oriented armorial discourses in Chrétien de Troyes' *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* and a striking contrast to the materially-productive armorial discourses in *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*. When examined alongside a romance like *Gologras* that engages armorial discourses to establish and confirm the efficacy of its chivalric subjects, *Sir Gawain* can be seen to use armor to emphasize chivalric failure. This negative and, as I will demonstrate, non-productive engagement with armor amounts to a critique of the chivalric institution and should furthermore prompt us to question the poem's reputation in the romance tradition.

Sir Gawain's armor is easily the most-discussed chivalric assemblage in medieval scholarship but scholars have tended to focus their analytical readings on Gawain's heraldic symbols, discussing the material components of armor mostly as historical reference-points for military technology.⁶³ Elizabeth Porges Watson's examination of Gawain's helmet offers a singular example of an analysis focused on armor,

⁶³ Michael Lacy offers such an historical perspective, concluding merely that the depiction of Gawain's armor is authentic: Michael Lacy, "Armor I." *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson eds., (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 165-174.

understanding Gawain's arming act as constructing a "composite emblem of chivalry."⁶⁴ Watson examines Gawain's helmet in particular, historicizing the contemporary technology of a visored bascinet with a mail aventail and ultimately noting the knight's inability to live up to the communally-defined ideal etched into the helmet's decoration.⁶⁵ Though acutely interested in the role of armor, Watson's argument ultimately returns to the poem's representation of cultural symbolism. More recently, Rhonda Knight has examined a similar connection between the chivalric community and accoutrement by understanding Gawain's arming as replacing the knight's own unstable identity with that of the court.⁶⁶ I share Knight's assessment of armorially-dependent structures of chivalric identity but as with Watson, in Knight's argument the armorial signifier takes preeminence to armor in much the same way that scholars have been drawn to Gawain's famous pentangle, the highly-symbolic heraldic device emblazoned on Gawain's shield.

In his more traditional approach to narrative structure, Donald R. Howard notes the correspondences between the poem doubling of arming acts, journeys, descriptions of destination, trials, and confessions, suggesting that this doubling reveals the poem's essential mathematical balance.⁶⁷ Though his work is ultimately more concerned with

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Porges Watson, "The Arming of Gawain: Vrysoun and Cercle," *Leeds Studies in English* 18 (1987): 31.

⁶⁵ Watson, "The Arming of Gawain," 32.

⁶⁶ Rhonda Knight, "All Dressed Up with Someplace to Go: Regional Identity in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer: The Yearbook of the New Chaucer Society*, 25 (2003): 277, 279.

⁶⁷ Donald R. Howard, "Structure and Symmetry in Sir Gawain." *Speculum* 39.3 (1964): 424-433.

creating a dichotomy between Gawain's base desires and spiritual aspirations, by highlighting the importance of the addition of the girdle to Gawain's second arming act, Howard participates in a vein of scholarship that assumes "the description of the arming of Sir Gawain gives no symbolic meaning to anything *but* the pentangle."⁶⁸ Ross G. Arthur responds to such a supposition in his seminal deconstruction of the signs in *Sir Gawain* when he too privileges the shield and its pentangle over the more material elements of Gawain's knighthood. Ross even suggests that the number of lines in which the pentangle is explained is reason enough to treat it as integral to the poem as a whole.⁶⁹

Arthur and many other critics drawn to the imagery of the pentangle have generally ignored Gawain's arming act, which takes up almost exactly as many lines as the poem's explanation of the pentangle.⁷⁰ Arthur classifies the pentangle as a legible sign because its signification is so thoroughly developed in the narration but generally disregards the poem's engagement with chivalric materiality.⁷¹ For some, this tendency to ignore materiality seems influenced by an assumption that abstract symbols were more capable of signification than material objects.

Derek Brewer similarly assumes the preeminent importance of heraldry in understanding the chivalric subject in his reading of the *Gawain* poet's implementation of

⁶⁸ Howard, "Structure and Symmetry," 426.

⁶⁹ Ross G. Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 22.

⁷⁰ The arming act occupies fifty-two lines (566-618) while the shield is presented and the pentangle is explained in fifty lines (619-669).

⁷¹ Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory*, 26.

the arming “topos” in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.⁷² Brewer also inaccurately claims that armor lacks importance to the overall narrative, by supposing “once it has done its work of enhancement and glorification, both material and moral, [armor] need play no further part in the advancement of the narrative sequence of events.”⁷³ Brewer would have us believe that an arming act has no other structural purpose to the romance narrative than its appearance as a trope in a call to heroic action. Brewer forgets or discounts that the arming acts in *Sir Gawain* are structurally bookended and developed as a two-part topos that frames Gawain’s quest.

Other treatments of Gawain’s armor regularly call attention to its ability to obscure or overtake the identity of the knight and add to it an aristocratic, noble, or regional identity. Claire Kinney responds to Geraldine Heng’s reading of Gawain’s girdle (discussed below), understanding this sartorial signifier as a representation of elite society constructing itself.⁷⁴ Suzanne Craymer notes the inability of Gawain’s body to signify nobility independently of his clothes and armor.⁷⁵ Susan Crane, too, in her seminal study

⁷² Derek Brewer, “Armour II: The Arming Topos as Literature,” *A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson eds., (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1997), 175-180. Brewer’s essay appears immediately after and in response to Lacy’s in the same volume and problematically does *not* actually address armorial materiality.

⁷³ Brewer, “Armour II,” 179.

⁷⁴ Clare R. Kinney, “The (Dis)Embodied Hero and the Signs of Manhood in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” (*Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*. Ed. Clare A. Lees. *Medieval Cultures* vo. 7. Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 56.

⁷⁵ Suzanne S. Craymer, “Signifying Chivalric Identities: Armor and Clothing in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” (*Medieval Perspectives* 14, 1999), 50-60.

of clothing and identity examines the ways in which Gawain himself is obscured or outperformed by his clothing and the heraldic symbols it displays.⁷⁶

The pentangle emblazoned on Gawain's shield, easily the most potent heraldic device in the romance, garners a great deal of critical attention for its religious implications, its deployment of heraldry, and its symbolic correspondence to the narrative itself. The critical draw to the pentangle may have a great deal to do with the poet's own deliberate unpacking of this heraldic symbol, which he prefaces saying, "quy þe pentangel apendez to þat prynce noble / am in tent yow to telle, þof tary hyt me schulde" [why the pentangle relates to that noble prince / I am intent to tell you, though it will take extra time.]⁷⁷ The poet then proceeds to lay out in extensive detail the system of fives that correspond to the shape of this "endeles knot" [endless knot]: five wits, five fingers, five wounds of Christ, five joys of Mary, and five chivalric ideals.⁷⁸ The care with which the poet explains the pentangle's symbolism suggests its novelty, as if this system of meaning could not possibly have been implicit according to any established standards of medieval heraldry. In fact, many scholars who have analyzed the significance of this symbol have relied on classical or mystical associations and have rarely, if ever, cited contemporary heraldic practice; most of the evidence for the pentangle's symbolism is

⁷⁶ Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

⁷⁷ *Sir Gawain*, 623-624.

⁷⁸ *Sir Gawain*, 640-659.

internal to the poem.⁷⁹ Such deliberation indicates uncertainty over the reader's understanding of the pentangle's significance, as if this particular appropriation of that symbol was a poetic innovation. The meaning of Gawain's arming act, on the other hand, would have been far more implicit and so readily-understood that it did not require an exhaustive explanation on the part of the poet. Readers familiar with romance and other chivalric texts would have come to *Sir Gawain* with a keen awareness of the importance of the poem's armorial inventory.

As seen above in Jacobus de Cessolius' *Chesse*, the inventory of equipment was a common trope for idealizing medieval chivalry. In Chrétien's *Erec et Enide* we see the protagonist's equipment inventoried in a fair amount of detail considering the simplicity of Erec's equipment compared to later technology. The detail and symbolism of the inventory in both chivalric manuals and romance grew in parallel with the complexity of the armor. In his thirteenth-century chivalric manual *Llibre qui es de l'ordre de cavalleria* [*Book of the Order of Chivalry*], published in English by William Caxton in 1484, Ramon Llull explains the symbolism behind each component of the knight's equipment, detailing among other things the helmet as signifying a fear of shame, the hauberk strength against vices, the chaucers steadfastness, the spurs diligence or swiftness, the gorget obedience to

⁷⁹ For example: J. F. Kitley "The endless knot': Magical Aspects of the Pentangle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 4.2 (1971): 41-50. G. Morgan, "The Significance of the Pentangle Symbolism in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Modern Language Review* 74 (1979): 769-790. C. K. Stephens, "The 'Pentangle Hypothesis': A Dating History and Resetting of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 31 (2006): 174-202.

the feudal lord and to chivalry, the shield the defense of the prince, and the gauntlets a barrier against evil.⁸⁰ Lull's inventory is much more morally and spiritually charged than the more basic material inventories offered in many romance narratives, but it still suggests an implicit meaning to the arming act that has developed alongside the technology itself. Lull's book, written in the late thirteenth century, had already been influential in Europe for nearly one hundred years before the composition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and was only one of many popular symbolic treatments of the armorial inventory.⁸¹

The potential for reading the signification of Gawain's armor in *Sir Gawain* is as great, if not greater than, that of the pentangle, despite what the wealth of available scholarship focused on the latter suggests. Even Howard admits the immateriality of the pentangle as a major factor in the draw toward symbolic readings.⁸² In examining *Sir Gawain*, I follow Kellie Robertson's suggestion that scholars of medieval materiality resist the assumption that abstract signs carried more symbolic weight than material objects in the Middle Ages. Robertson urges scholars of medieval materiality:

⁸⁰ Lull, Ramon. *Book of Knighthood. Ramon Llull's Book of Knighthood and the anonymous Ordene de Chevalerie*. William Caxton trans. Brian R. Price modernization. The Chivalry Bookshelf, 2001. 63-75. The chapter also details the meanings of the sword, lance, mace, misericorde (dagger), saddle, horse, reigns, bardings (horse armor), surcoat, heraldic device, and banner.

⁸¹ Geoffroi di Charny offers a similar symbolic reading of armorial components in his mid-fourteenth-century *The Book of Chivalry* (36.1-49). Geoffroi di Charny, *The Book of Chivalry*, Richard W. Kaeuper and Elspeth Kennedy eds., (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996). Even the biblical book Ephesians articulates spiritual preparation to armorial materiality in the "Armor of God" (Ephesians 6:10-17).

⁸² Howard, "Structure and Symmetry in *Sir Gawain*," 426.

[i]nstead of seeing a thing as reducible only to its physical properties or matter reducible to extended substance, we might be able to see an object as determined in part by the sedimented notions of thinghood operative at the moment of its own production. Such an understanding would go some way towards leavening the transhistorical assumptions behind more recent materialist paradigms such as ‘thing ‘theory’ and its iterations.⁸³

Robertson raises this charge in response to a periodizing trend in materialist scholarship that dismisses the Middle Ages for being too metaphysical. It is this very trend that has made it possible for scholars like Ross Arthur to claim that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* sits “head and shoulders above all other English Romances.”⁸⁴ This archaic assessment of greatness ignores the value of thinghood operating in parallel to abstract meaning that is a central aspect of nearly all medieval romances. In fact, *Sir Gawain* is profoundly *not* a representative example of the romance genre, since it actively resists material productivity. Treating the armor of *Sir Gawain* as agentic material, what Jane Bennett would call “vibrant matter,” reveals the ways in which this narrative critiques chivalric ideals and romance traditions by emphasizing the inertness and non-productivity of armor.⁸⁵

In contrast to the repetitive arming and disarming of Chrétien de Troyes’ knights, in *Sir Gawain* the eponymous knight only arms twice. These two moments represent the poet’s only engagement with armorial discourses since, in stark contrast to Gawain’s performance in *Gologras*, in *Sir Gawain* the knight never actually fights. Whereas arming

⁸³ Kellie Robertson, “Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto,” *Exemplaria* 22.2 (2010): 110.

⁸⁴ Arthur, *Medieval Sign Theory*, 18.

⁸⁵ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2010).

and disarming represents an extended structural principle throughout the works of Chrétien de Troyes, the two armings in *Sir Gawain* indicate a distillation of narrative scope; rather than repeatedly rehearse the arming act in all its fourteenth-century complexity the poet constructs a narrative with arming acts as structural bookends. This also allows the arming act itself to draw significantly greater attention, if not in terms of detail then certainly in terms of line-count. The first arming act, which accompanies Gawain's departure from Arthur's court, proceeds as follows:

Dubbed in a dublet of a dere tars,
 And syþen a crafty capados, closed aloft,
 Þat wyth a bryzt blaumer was bounden withinne;
 Þenne set þay þe *sabatounz* vpon þe segge fotez,
 His legez lapped in stel with luflych *greuez*,
 With *polayne* piched þer-to, policed ful clene,
 Aboute his knez knaged wyth knotez of golde;
 Queme *quysswes* þen, þat coyntlych closed
 His thik þrawen þyzez, with þwonges to tachched;
 And syþen þe brawdren *bryné* of bryzt stel rynggez
 Vmbeweued þat wyz, vpon wlonk stuffe;
 And wel bornyst *brace* vpon his boþe armes,
 With gode *cowters* and gay, and *glouez* of plate,
 And alle þe godlych gere þat hym gayn schulde
 þat tyde;
 Wyth ryche cote armure,
 His gold *sporez* spend with pryde,
 Gurde wyth a bront ful sure,
 With silk sayn vmbe his syde.

[...]

Þenne hentes he þe helme, and hastily hit kisses,
 Þat watz stapled stiffly, and stoffed wythinne;
 Hit watz hyze on his hede, hasped bihynde,
 Wyth a lyztli vrysoun ouer þe auentayle.

[Dressed in a doublet of precious Tharsian silk
 And then a skillfully-made cape, closed aloft
 He was bound within a bright ermine;
 Then they set sabatons upon the man's feet,
 His legs overlapped in steel with lovely greaves,

Then poleyns, polished brightly, were attached,
About his knees fastened with knots of gold;
Fine cuisses then, that snugly closed around
His thick, brawny thighs with thongs;
And then the braided coat of bright steel rings
Covered that man, upon splendid stuff
And well-burnished bracers were put upon both arms,
With good, beautiful couters and gloves of plate,
And all the goodly gear that should benefit him
that day
With rich coat-armor,
His gold spurs spun with pride
He was girt with a sword that was made secure,
With a silk sash on his side.

[...]
Then took he the helm and hastily kissed it.
It was stapled stiffly and stuffed on the inside.
It sat high on his head, hasped behind
With a light mail neck-guard over the aventail]⁸⁶

To review, the steel elements of Gawain's gear include: sabatons, greaves, poleyns, cuisses, a mail brinie, bracers, couters, gloves, spurs, and a helmet with mail aventail.

The enumeration of each of these individual pieces of armor serves to construct the chivalric body of Sir Gawain, quite literally from the ground up. As with Erec's first arming in *Erec et Enide*, the arming act begins at the feet and ends at the head. Every limb in between is accounted for in vertical sequence. Most of the components mentioned in this inventory are made of plate, the only exception being the "bryne of bryzt stel rynges." Helmut Nickel refers to the armor in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as

⁸⁶ *Sir Gawain*, 571-589, 605-608. Emphasis mine. This arming act also includes the textile elements of Gawain's suit, his saddle, and his horse's equipment but I have limited my focus to the metallic elements of Gawain's accoutrement since they would have made up the primary visual surfaces of Gawain's knighthood.

“transitional” since, having been written in the fourteenth century, it occupies a technological middle ground between twelfth-century mail and fifteenth-century plate.⁸⁷

Nickel classifies the armor and its narrative as particularly appropriate to a subgenre of romance he labels the spiritual quest. Michael Lacy also testifies to the historical accuracy of the poem’s depiction of fourteenth-century armor, citing the clear similarities to a rare example in Chartres Cathedral.⁸⁸ Additionally, the poem’s description has been faithfully represented in the Cotton Nero A.x manuscript itself (Figure 9).⁸⁹



Figure 9: Gawain armed in Cotton Nero MS A.x

When *Sir Gawain* was written, this equipment was at the cutting edge of armorial technology. This arming act, positioned prior to the commencement of Gawain’s adventure, emphasizes the knight’s chivalric wholeness and preparedness; at this point in the poem, Gawain is well-girded against the kinds of injuries a knight is bound to sustain in chivalric combat. While it would be less effective than full plate against a direct strike, the inclusion of the “lyztli vrysoun ouer þe auentayle” indicates Gawain’s anticipation of

⁸⁷ Helmut Nickel, "Arthurian Armings for War and for Love," *Arthuriana* 5.6 (1995): 11. Despite its apparent later date, the equipment depicted in *Gologras* occupies a strikingly similar era of technology, suggesting either an antiquarian depiction sensitive to historical reality or a later date of composition. I find the latter more likely.

⁸⁸ Lacy, Michael, "Armor I", 166.

⁸⁹ British Library, Cotton Nero MS A.x, F125/129v.

the neck-blow he knows he shall receive by the hand of the Green Knight. This preparedness represents an important contrast to the clothing of the Green Knight who, upon initiating the beheading game, declares:

For had I founded in fere, in feztynge wyse,
I haue a huberghe at home ad a helme boþe,
A schelde, and a scharp spere, schinande bryzt,
Ande oþer weppenes to welde, I wene wel als;
Bot for I wolde no were, my wedez ar softer.

[For had I come in here, ready to fight,
I have at home both a hauberk and a helm,
A shield, and a sharp spear, shining bright
And other weapons I know how to wield,
But since I wish no conflict, my clothes are softer]⁹⁰

The Green Knight must spell out to the “berdeles childer” [beardless children] of Arthur’s court a fact they should already have been capable of reading from his appearance: he is *not* there to engage in chivalric combat. Gawain’s response to what should be a game is to prepare himself “in feztynge wyse,” arming himself to the teeth for a fight that will never happen and thus forecasting even at this early stage in the poem the future failure of his chivalric identity.

Gawain’s second arming act occurs upon his departure from Hautdesert and inventories most of the same equipment as the first, with the notable additions not only of the green girdle but a breastplate as well:

Fyrst he clad ym in his cloþez, þe colde for to were;
And syþen his oþer harnays, þat holdely watz keped,
Boþe his *paunce*, and his *platez*, piked ful clene,
þe rynges rokked of þe roust, of his riche *bruny*;

⁹⁰ *Sir Gawain*, 267-271.

This arming act contains slightly less detail but the most essential pieces of the assemblage are inventoried: paunce, plates, birny, coat armor, and girdle. The simple existence of this arming act calls into question Derek Brewer's dismissal of arming as essential to the narrative. This second arming act responds to and offers a telling variation on the first. While the first arming act eschewed the breastplate, the addition of the "paunce" and "platez" along with the girdle reveals Gawain's increased anxiety over the eventuality of his meeting with the Green Knight. Not convinced that his previous equipment will be adequately protective for this encounter, Gawain has elected for an upgrade that adds an extra step to the arming process and allows the protective surfaces on his torso to match the plates covering his limbs. Though he knows the parameters of the beheading game, Gawain arms as if he anticipates the kind of chivalric clashes we see in *Gologras*, full of flying sparks and smashing plates. These elements even bear similar marks of artisanal labor.

Both armorial inventories quoted above heavily emphasize the quality of Gawain's gear by indicating its workmanship and maintenance. Almost every verb used to describe the strength and value of Gawain's armor references an invisible squire or smith. Gawain's cape is described as "crafty" with ermine "bounden with-inne," referencing the skill of the artisan as well as the method by which this garment was assembled. Similarly, Gawain's helmet is described in similar terms as "stapled stiffly, and stoffed wyth inne." The stapling here refers to a method by which the mail aventail was attached to the helmet and the stuffing refers to the padding on the helmet's

interior.⁹² The labor of the squire in maintaining Gawain's armor can also be seen in the poleyns, paunce, and plates that are "piked ful clene," the rings of his mail coat which are "rokked of þe roust," and every other metallic surface that has been "wiped ful wel and wlonk." The knight himself is not the only figure to have participated in this preparation; his arming incorporates the labor of those in service to the chivalric class who work to protect each individual part of Gawain's body for a coming conflict.

This anticipation of combat is further developed by the poetry's percussive alliteration. In Gawain's first arming scene, a number of his armorial components are girded with adjectives that emphasize percussive vocalizations. His cloak, for example, "crafty capadoes, closed aloft" repeat the hard "c" in rhythmic triplicate as are his "knez knaged with knotez of golde" and his "quysswes [...] þat coyntlych closed."⁹³ These "quysswes" appear directly after the "knotez," creating six velar stops that imbue these armorial components with phonetic percussiveness. This effect is also realized through the alliterative bilabial stops in Gawain's "polayneþ piched þer-to, policed ful clene" which further simulates the percussive impact associated with armorial components.⁹⁴ Similar phonetic elements appear in Gawain's second arming act when he is "clad [...] in his cloþez, þe colde for to were," when he dons his "paunce and his platez, piked ful clene," and when he "belted þe bronde vpon his balze haunchez."⁹⁵ Whereas *Gologras*

⁹² Watson, "The Arming of Gawain," 32.

⁹³ *Sir Gawain*, 572, 577-8.

⁹⁴ *Sir Gawain*, 576.

⁹⁵ *Sir Gawain*, 2015, 2017, 2032

realizes similar alliterative moments in the context of combat when blows “bristis birneis with brandis burnist ful bene” or make “the spalis and the sparkis spedely out sprang,” by locating these phonemes in an arming act without subsequent combat *Sir Gawain* causes its armor to ring hollow.⁹⁶ These sounds, though effective in representing the aural effect of crashing armor, are ultimately evanescent and immaterial since they remain intangible in a chivalric narrative remarkably devoid of violence.

Despite the material and sonic indications of Gawain’s preparedness for chivalric combat, this preparation is ultimately needless, because the fight never occurs.⁹⁷ As a condition to fulfilling his obligation at the Green Chapel, Gawain assures the Green Knight:

“I schal stonde styлле,
And warp þe no wernyng, to worch as þe lykez
nowhare.”
He lened with þe nek, and lute,
And schewed þat schyre al bare

[I shall stand still,
and give thee no trouble, to work as you like,
right here.”
He leaned with his neck and bent,
And showed that area all bare.]⁹⁸

⁹⁶ *Gologras*, 688, 629.

⁹⁷ In making this claim, I openly dismiss the fights that he experiences in the liminal space between Camelot and Hautdesert as chivalric combats since they are not fully narrated and involve fantastical beasts rather than opposing knights.

⁹⁸ *Sir Gawain*, 2252-2256. It is later revealed that this also required Gawain to remove his helmet: 2317-2319.

Though Gawain stands fully-armed and prepared for a fight, fulfilling his contract with the Green Knight means willingly displaying his unarmored neck, an act that subverts his entire armorial inventory. The “strok” also subverts Gawain’s equipment when, rather than the gross impact we see in *Gologras*, the Green Knight’s blow “Bot snyrt hym on þat on syde, þat seuered þe hyde / þe scarp shrank to þe flesche þurȝ þe schyre grece” [Only nicked him on that side, which cut his skin / the sharp blade sank to the flesh through the fair fat.]⁹⁹ The alveolar sibilant consonants in these lines contrasts sharply with the gross impacts of *Gologras*’ explosive percussion. This blow is surgical, precise, and nearly-silent; the Green Knight’s blade encounters none of the armorial resistance that would raise the decibels of the encounter. In her examination of the sartorial elements of *Sir Gawain*, Geraldine Heng considers this shallow blow to Gawain’s neck a moment of castration.¹⁰⁰ This castration, according to Heng, is inherently tied to the central symbol of feminine subversion: the green girdle, to which Gawain has clung in order to protect his body and which has accordingly undercut his ability to assert masculine control. I would simply add that Gawain’s reliance on the girdle for this purpose further subverts his armor and accentuates his loss of chivalric masculinity in this anti-climactic moment in the Green Chapel; the alliterative sibilance makes this castration clean and complete.

⁹⁹ *Sir Gawain*, 2312-2313.

¹⁰⁰ Geraldine Heng, “Feminine Knots and the Other *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” (*PMLA* 106.3, 1991), 505-6.

After the axe-stroke is delivered, Gawain immediately postures himself for a fight, replacing his helmet and readying his shield, but the Green knight deflates Gawain's intentions, reminding him of their agreement, saying:

I hyzt þe a strok, and þou hit hatz, halde þe wel payed,
I relece þe of þe remnaunt of ryztes alle oþer;
Iif I deliuer had bene, a boffet, paraunter,
I coupe wropeloker haf waret, to þe haf wrozt anger.

[I gave you a stroke, and you I have hit. Consider yourself repaid.
I release you of of all other claims;
If I had been nimble, perhaps a stroke
More wrathful I could have dealt, which would have brought you
anguish.]¹⁰¹

The Green knight is undoubtedly capable of combat but refuses a further challenge as outside the bounds of the agreement, making Gawain's armor functionally redundant. Armor's primary function is to protect the knight during combat, and despite the significant development of Gawain's equipment, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* resists allowing Gawain's armor to serve this function. The number of lines dedicated to the inventory of Gawain's armor is evidence enough to indicate its importance in defining his chivalric character and its ultimate lack of importance. Rather than being unnecessary, as Brewer supposes, the armor is preeminently important *because* it undermines Gawain's heroic characterization.

In citing the ways this unproductivity applies to narrative structure, Watson describes the inertia of Gawain's chivalric symbols, the pentangle in particular, as

¹⁰¹ *Sir Gawain*, 2341-2344.

representing an “anticlimax, total and devastating.”¹⁰² This anticlimax is a blow to Gawain’s chivalric identity and, as Watson argues, a further indication of the poem’s active disengagement with conventions of romance armorial discourses. Some critics have examined the poem’s ultimate shaming of Gawain in terms of its spiritual undertones. As Howard asserts of Gawain’s chivalric failures with the girdle and his unchivalric attitude of self-preservation, “The poem suggests [...] how the worldly aims of chivalry and the other-worldly aims of the Christian life are ideally interrelated, but, for fallen man, potentially incompatible.”¹⁰³ Considering the poem’s existence in a single manuscript with *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, and *Patience*, allegorical narratives that focus on medieval spiritual morality, we might more easily associate *Sir Gawain* with a pilgrim’s narrative than a truly chivalric quest; even crusader narratives held the promise of a good battle. In its appropriation of what was generally understood as the secular or at least non-religious principles of medieval chivalry, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* refuses to validate chivalric assemblage according to the conventions of the romance genre.

Brewer calls attention to a similar effect in Geoffrey Chaucer’s more satirical treatment of chivalry in the *Tale of Thopas*.¹⁰⁴ Brewer draws this connection to contrast what he sees as the high seriousness of *Sir Gawain*’s presentation of chivalric heroism and Chaucer’s mocking criticism of it. As mentioned above, Brewer’s argument ignores a key importance of armor in *Sir Gawain* and in doing so fails to recognize the similarities

¹⁰² Watson, “The Arming of Gawain,” 37.

¹⁰³ Howard, “Structure and Symmetry,” 429.

¹⁰⁴ Brewer, “Armour II,” 179.

between these two poems' engagements with armorial discourses. Like *Sir Gawain*, Chaucer's tale includes a well-developed armorial inventory with no fewer than sixteen separate components.¹⁰⁵ The detail of this extended inventory and pilgrim-Chaucer's exaggerated romanticization of Thopas incite the host to retort, "Namoore of this, for Goddes dignitee!" [No more of this for God's dignity.]¹⁰⁶ This cuts Chaucer's tale short and prevents the overstuffed Thopas, whose caricature of knighthood represents an indictment of the romance genre, from ever entering into combat with Olifaunt the giant where his armor would presumably have been put to use. Critics often understand Chaucer's tale as a mockery of the over-idealization of chivalry in romance narratives.¹⁰⁷ In explaining the absurdity of Thopas' historically mismatched armor and backward arming procedure, Mark Diccico calls *The Tale of Sir Thopas* a "burlesque of the medieval romance genre."¹⁰⁸ Diccico bases this assessment on Chaucer's employment of armorial discourses: Thopas' gear includes a temporal mishmash of technologies from different and non-concurrent periods in military technology and is girded onto the absurd

¹⁰⁵ These include: linen cloth, breeches, aketon, haubergion, plate hauberk (or breastplate), coat armor, shield, jambeaux (leg armor), sword sheath, helm, saddle, bridel, spear, and horse: Geoffrey Chaucer, *Sir Thopas, The Riverside Chaucer* 3rd ed., Larry D. Benson ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 286-289.

¹⁰⁶ Chaucer, *Sir Thopas*, 919.

¹⁰⁷ Cohen argues that the tale emasculates Thopas by limiting and undermining both his body and his equipment. Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome, "Diminishing Masculinity in Chaucer's *Tale of Sir Thopas*," *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in The Canterbury Tales and Troilus and Criseyde*, (Cambridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1998), 143-155.

¹⁰⁸ Diccico, Mark. "The Arming of Sir Thopas Reconsidered." *Notes and Queries* 46.1 (1999): 14-16.

knight entirely out of practical order. In essence, Chaucer demonstrates his knowledge of romance conventions as well as his deep criticism for chivalric narrative by employing the armorial inventory not as a triumphant construction of chivalric character but as a mockery of it. By closely detailing the components of his knight's equipment only to render them utterly useless to the narrative, Chaucer constructs a critique of chivalry that closely reflects the movements made by the *Gawain*-poet; both poems engage armorial discourses to emphasize the impotence and unproductivity of their chivalric subjects. *Sir Gawain* remains deeply engaged with the conventions of romance armorial discourses and demonstrates this through Gawain's arming acts, but ultimately articulates a negative relationship with these traditions by rendering armor, chivalry, and even Gawain himself, utterly unproductive. By extension, the labor of those involved with the labor of producing and maintaining the material elements of medieval chivalry are made inert and valueless; the armorer and the squire are made redundant.

Productive Romance

Many of the romances that have contributed to the French and English romance traditions demonstrate an acute interest in building things, be they suits of armor or round tables. While romance narratives may be acutely engaged in the violent deconstruction of chivalric bodies, as Siobhain Bly Calkin observes, "even as it spreads chaos and menaces life and livelihood, war can construct kings, unify a polity, and restructure socio-political

institutions.”¹⁰⁹ Calkin terms this effect “productive violence,” indicating the potential for chivalric combat to create, even if the product is abstract. Chrétien de Troyes’ prototypical romances regularly incorporate new knights into the King’s ranks and mobilize those same knights to form new alliances and quell rebel factions in order to grow and maintain the Arthurian realm. The romance knight, the artisan at the center of these developments, is celebrated for his role in producing these assemblages in much the same way he had been in the earlier French romances. Even in other Middle English Gawain romances, some of which do not engage as heavily with armorial discourses, we see an interest in social and material production that is consistent with *Gologras* and Chrétien. In particular, *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* offer variations on the late-medieval English engagements with social production that also situate Gawain as the primary artisan.

The plot of *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* shares a great deal in common with both *Sir Gawain* and *Gologras*. As in *Gologras*, Arthur is confronted with the problematic independence of a local lord and sends Gawain to resolve the issue. As in *Sir Gawain*, once there Gawain is confronted with a number of bizarre tests of his chivalric fidelity, including the offer of sex with the Carle’s wife. As protective gear for the protagonist, armor makes almost no appearance in *Carle* except for one brief moment when the Carle shows Gawain a room:

¹⁰⁹ Siobhain Bly Calkin, *Saracens and the Making of English Identity: The Auchinleck Manuscript* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 189-190.

There as lay ten fadir of dede menn bonys,
Al yn blode, as I wene
Ther hynges many a bloody serke,
And eche of heme a dyvers marke.

[where lay ten cartloads of dead men's bones
Covered in blood, as I understand
There hung many a bloody shirt
and each of them bore a different heraldic mark.]¹¹⁰

The Carle explains that each of these “serkes,” mail shirts emblazoned with heraldic symbols, represent all the knights that failed the Carle’s tests of chivalry. On one level, this collection of bloody armor indicates the vulgar brutality of the Carle (“churl” in Old English).¹¹¹ However, these shirts also represent the repeated lack of success that Gawain’s predecessors have had in incorporating the Carle into their respective kingdoms, as if the owners of these shirts had failed proofing. Charles ffoulkes notes that components of armor were often subjected to test-strikes by a relevant weapon to demonstrate the armor’s “proof” against the kind of blow it would receive in battle. The marks of these blows were into the finished design as an indication of the suit’s potential effectiveness.¹¹² The suits of armor in the Carle’s collection are thus representations of the research and development that seems to have gone into working a particularly

¹¹⁰ *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle, Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*. Thomas Hahn ed., (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 533-536.

¹¹¹ Thomas Hahn understands the narrative as a test of Gawain’s courtesy against the Carle’s churlishness. “Introduction: *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*,” Thomas Hahn ed., *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 81.

¹¹² ffoulkes, *The Armourer and his Craft*, 69.

adamantine chunk of unrefined chivalric matter.¹¹³ Gawain succeeds where these previous knights had failed when at the romance's conclusion Arthur declares to the Carle: "Here I make the yn this stownde / A knyght of the Table Rownde: / Karlyle thi name schalle be" [Here I make you in this moment / A knight of the Table Round: / Carlisle shall be your name.]¹¹⁴ In his dealings with the Carle, Gawain has proved himself and by extension his king to be worthy of the Carle's respect and thus, in a gesture of social production strikingly similar to the conclusion of *Gologras*, the king incorporates the Carle into the larger Arthurian assemblage. This final seal of approval solidifies the finished quality of the Carle as a chivalric component whom has been *made* a knight in more than one sense of the word.

The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle offers another iteration of socially-incorporative work performed by chivalric subjects. This romance is a fixture in the Loathly Lady narrative tradition and is a reflection of John Gower's *The Tale of Florent* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, but with one important variation: rather than a single knight questing for the answer to what women want most, in *Wedding* both Arthur and Gawain depart to cover separate halves of the kingdom in search of the answer. Gawain explains this plan to the king, saying:

evere wheras ye mete owther man or woman, in faye,
Ask of theym whate thay therto saye,

¹¹³ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes a similar transition occurring in the Carle's relative refinedness when he transitions from the churlish giant to an earl under Arthur's dominion: *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 132.

¹¹⁴ *Carle*, 631-633.

And I shalle also ryde anoder waye
And enquere of every man and woman and gett whatt I may
Of every man and womans answe;re;
And in a boke I shalle them wryte.

[whenever you meet either a man or a woman, honestly,
Ask of them what they say to the question,
And I will ride in the other direction,
And inquire of every man and woman and gather what I might
Of every man and woman's answer;
And in a book I shall write them]¹¹⁵

When the two meet again after their exhaustive survey of the kingdom,

Syr Gawen had gotten answerys so many
That had made a boke greatt, wytterly.
To the courte he cam agayn.
By that was the Kyng comyn with hys boke,
And eyther on others pampllett dyd loke

[Sir Gawain had got so many answers
That had made a great book, certainly,
To the court he came again.
By then the King had come with his own book,
And either looked upon the other's pages.]¹¹⁶

While we do not see here the kind of percussive labor portrayed in *Gologras*, Arthur and Gawain still engage in a form of labor that, while chivalric in its presentation as a quest, also appropriates the artisanal labor of the scribe and bookbinder. Their survey of the kingdom not only creates an inventory of the variety of opinions and perspectives that populate the lands under Arthur's control, but it also results in a tangible material object,

¹¹⁵ *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle, Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, Thomas Hahn ed., (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 185-190.

¹¹⁶ *Wedding*, 207-211.

the “boke,” that corresponds to and embodies the kingdom itself. While this romance does not evoke the armorer like *Gologras*, by policing the cultural assemblage of their kingdom, Arthur and Gawain incorporate another form of artisanal labor into chivalric labor and thus doubly-enact the work of social productivity.

In *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*, *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, and in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle* the exploits of the chivalric subject are confirmed in the parallel production of material objects and social assemblage. In this, all three romances participate in celebrating the chivalric subject by aligning the abstract with the material. If the consistency with which the Gawain romances emphasizes social and material productivity can be said to indicate a common motif in medieval romance it is similarly remarkable that *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a narrative praised by scholars for its poetic complexity and thematic depth, would also actively undermine such a foundational element of the romance genre. As of this writing, a basic MLA search reveals 1,065 hits for the poem, a significant contrast to the combined 28 hits for nearly every other major text in the Middle English Gawain romance tradition.¹¹⁷ Even the 9th edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* used in many undergraduate literature survey courses only supplements *Sir Gawain* with three of Marie de France’s *lais*, *Sir Orfeo*, and Chaucer’s *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*.

¹¹⁷ This includes five hits for *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*, seven for *The Knightly tale of Gologras and Gawain*, four for *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, ten for *The Avowyng of Arthur*, and two for *The Jeaste of Sir Gawain*. Search performed 26 July 2017.

Considering that the Breton lais occupy a slightly different genre than romance, especially Middle English Romance, that *Sir Orfeo* is distinctly beholden to its classical roots in the Orpheus myth, and that Chaucer is critical of romance in general, *Sir Gawain* ultimately represents many readers' primary encounter with the romance genre.¹¹⁸ *Sir Gawain* certainly deserves this treatment on a purely literary basis, but if other romances are actually more capable of representing a larger picture of the medieval social strata through their incorporation of artisanal imagery, then the institutional bias in favor of *Sir Gawain* inherently ignores an important form of social representation, namely of the artisanal hands involved in quite literally making the medieval chivalric subject.

In this chapter, I have attempted a comparison of two romances that follows Kellie Robertson's exhortations for scholars of medieval materiality. Part of Robertson's argument criticizes the tendency of scholarship to dismiss the potential for materialist readings in medieval literature because "the current definition of materialism is in large part the ideological legacy of the seventeenth century."¹¹⁹ According to Robertson, the materialist scholarship that grew out of early modern studies and Aristotelian hylomorphism has typically been deemed incompatible with the rejection of materialism commonly associated with medieval theology. Robertson's manifesto is an early response to a not-yet published version of Stephen Greenblatt's *The Swerve*, widely panned by medievalists for its periodizing claims over the origins of modernity. The fact remains, of

¹¹⁸ The *Norton Anthology* also includes Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, which I have argued elsewhere more closely reflects medieval debate poetry than romance.

¹¹⁹ Robertson, "Medieval Materialism," 102.

course, that Stephen Greenblatt is still the general editor of the Norton Anthologies and one must wonder if *Sir Gawain*'s long-standing treatment as a representative example of the medieval romance genre in Norton textbooks and in medieval scholarship may actually represent a passive preference for poetics over historical representativeness. Aside from its uniquely measured narrative and intricately-wrought imagery, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* deconstructs its own materiality in a way that is much more modern than other romances of its time. This may even help to explain the critical draw to the Gawain's pentangle over his armor. While *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is certainly a masterwork of poetic composition and symbolic development, editorial and critical choices inspired by these standards potentially marginalizes historically underrepresented classes and potentially indicates and permits a periodizing influence on our understanding of the medieval romance genre. *Sir Gawain* still engages armorial materiality, but does so for the sake of criticizing rather than confirming the institution of chivalry. If the Gawain romances are a materially and socially-productive subcategory of romance then surely a romance like *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*, though looser in narrative structure and poetic polish, but with a foundational interest in social development realized through material manufacture, deserves significantly more attention than it has been given to date.

Chapter 3

“Þei min armes apeired be, / Me bodi naþ no wounde”:

Redundancy, Stability, and the Chivalric Corpus in/of the Auchinleck Manuscript

In a September 2015 blog post titled “Erasmus Manuscript Saved for the Nation,” the British Library announced its acquisition of a unique English manuscript translation of Desiderius Erasmus’ sixteenth-century *Enchiridion militis Christiani*, also known as the *Handbook of the Christian Soldier*.¹ One of the theologian’s most popular works, the *Enchiridion* contains a long sermon on piety and fortitude written for a soldier with wayward tendencies. At one point in the *Enchiridion* the writing becomes self-referential as Erasmus exhorts the soldier to keep the book with him as a defense against temptation:

at the leste lett it not greve the to have w[ith] the this littel swerde which shall not be hevy to bere nor yet unproffitable for defence, for it is very littel yet if thow use hym wisely and cople w[ith] hym the buccler of feith thow shalt be hable to w[ith]stonde the ferce and raginge assaute of they enymye so that thow shalt have no dedly wounde.

[at the least, don’t let it bother you to carry this little sword, which shall not be heavy to bear nor yet un-usefull for defense, for it is very little, but if you use it wisely and couple it with the buckler of faith you will be able to withstand the fierce and raging assault of your enemy so that you will not be seriously wounded.]²

¹ Julian Harrison, “Erasmus Manuscript Saved for the Nation” (*Medieval Manuscripts Blog*). 29 September 2015.

² British Library Additional MS 89149. <www.bl.uk/>. f 19^r. Transcription/translation mine.

Erasmus' intended reader would certainly have been familiar with the more metallic equipment of the military lifestyle. The theologian accordingly casts the book itself as a kind of sword to be worn about the body, fixing its position as an essential element of the soldier's equipment. This conflation is appropriate, since the Greek word "enchorion" can mean both "manual," as in an instruction book, and "dagger." However, it is significant that the physical book in the hands of its reader is not understood as an offensive weapon, but rather, in conjunction with what Erasmus calls a "buckler of faith," as a defense against a potentially "deadly



Figure 20: Two swordsmen holding bucklers

wound" (Figure 10).³ Having presumably been made small enough to carry on one's body, the book's portability made it ideal for protecting the corporeal and spiritual bodies of the Christian knight.⁴ This particular copy of the *Enchorion* represents a significant paleographical find not only because it predates the previously known Middle English translation of Erasmus' work, printed by Wynkyn de Worde in 1533, but also because it exists almost entirely intact. This fact slightly undermines Erasmus' figuration of the book as protective, since a piece of protective military technology, whether a shield or a book, would likely not have escaped the heat of battle unmarked. While the battle in

³ A buckler was a small shield used in fencing and dueling. They were in use as early as the thirteenth century, as seen in this image from a fencing manual known as the Walpurgis Fechtbuch dating to the 1320s: Royal Armouries, Leeds, UK. MS I.33, f 31^v.

⁴ At roughly eleven inches tall, the Middle English manuscript of Erasmus' text is much larger than the Latin original, which was printed small enough for easy portability.

which Erasmus imagines his *Enchiridion* being used is far more symbolic than literal, it still suggests an element of the book's use-value. In order to protect himself, the "militis christiani" must handle and wield his protective equipment. This *Enchiridion*'s pristineness suggests disuse in much the same way a shining and polished suit of armor indicates that it was probably never used in battle.

If we can imagine a book, especially a chivalric text, serving a secondary function as protective equipment, what happens when the object itself is subject to the strokes and thrusts of a blade? Moreover, what if that text could anticipate its own destruction in much the same way that armor does? This chapter will examine the famous Auchinleck manuscript, a fourteenth-century miscellaneous manuscript notable for containing one of the largest collections of entirely Middle English texts in a single volume. A significant number of these texts are also romances that are just as engaged with chivalric armorial discourses as those discussed in the previous chapters. I will examine the ways in which the Auchinleck Manuscript anticipates its own disintegration and attempts to stabilize the textual and material corpora it embodies. Auchinleck's intricate assemblage of romance narratives, through its layered redundancy and embodiment of chivalric damage, acts in tandem with the armor depicted within, highlighting the potential for the premodern book to actively participate in medieval armorial discourses.⁵

⁵ I borrow the term "premodern book" from Seth Lerer: "Bibliographical theory and the textuality of the codex: toward a history of the premodern book," in *The Medieval Manuscript Book: Cultural Approaches*, Michael Johnston and Michael van Dussen eds. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 19.

It has been my supposition thus far that medieval romance is acutely engaged with the materiality of knighthood in its assembly of the chivalric subject. Most of this materiality has to do with chivalric armor, the material of a knight's identity, an engagement that extends to forms of material production. Medieval romance is engaged in the production and maintenance of chivalric matter, be that matter metallurgical or political. This is not to say that chivalric matter cannot be destroyed in a romance. Even Chrétien de Troyes who, as established in Chapter one, is acutely interested in the construction and reconstruction of the chivalric body, also accepts deconstruction of chivalric matter as a reality of knightly combat. This continuum of assemblage and disassemblage emphasizes the use-value of chivalric matter; armor matters to the chivalric subject insofar as it serves the practical function of corporeal protection. As discussed in the previous chapter, a narrative like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* that refuses to make armor useful rejects a base premise of the genre. *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*, on the other hand, is especially interested in the imagery of manufacture, of production; the combat in *Gologras* emphasizes Quadrant 1 on the cycle below.

A Cycle of Armorial Materiality



Despite Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's suggestion that the chivalric subject exists in a perpetual state of monodirectional becoming, the material reality of armor is inherently

cyclical; the function for which it is created also causes its destruction and thus presents the need for repair.⁶ We see this destruction rehearsed repeatedly in romance depictions of combat when rings of mail scatter across the field, straps of leather burst, and plates are split and shattered, leaving the post-combat knight in a ragged state of disassembly that demonstrates most romancers' keen awareness of the material realities of knighthood. However, the principles of armorial discourse that I have developed thus far have depended specifically on the forms of materiality *depicted* in the narratives of romance texts rather than those *embodied* by them. This chapter brings these concepts to bear on our understanding of manuscript materiality through an examination of National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1, known more famously as the Auchinleck Manuscript, perhaps the single most important compendium of the romance genre in Middle English.

Reading Biblioclasm in the Auchinleck Manuscript

Despite or perhaps *because* of its cultural and antiquarian value, the Auchinleck manuscript has been subjected to extensive deconstruction at the hand of medieval and/or early modern biblioclasts. Most scholars agree that the manuscript was created in London in the mid-fourteenth century, but no records exist until 1744 when Alexander Boswell,

⁶ A more extensive treatment of Cohen's theories can be found in my first chapter. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "The Inhuman Circuit," in *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, Gail Weiss and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen eds., (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 167.

Lord Auchinleck, presented it to the Advocates' Library.⁷ Sometime during this blank period the manuscript had been subjected to a number of targeted biblioclasms that have left many of its texts incomplete, fragmented, or missing altogether.⁸ Arthur Bahr estimates that Auchinleck has lost at least fourteen whole texts which would have occupied eighty or more manuscript leaves.⁹ Auchinleck's romances have been particularly vulnerable to the blade of the biblioclast; only three of the manuscript's eighteen romances exist in their entirety.¹⁰ The romances themselves, most of which focus on popular folk heroes who appear in a number of other Middle English and Anglo-Norman iterations, demonstrate an interest in the deconstruction of the chivalric subject consistent with previously established conventions of chivalric romance. Most of the romances discussed in my previous chapters exist in a state of relative material wholeness; by contrast, the physical damage that has been done to the Auchinleck Manuscript demands a reading of its chivalric and material disassemblages in parallel.

⁷ According to Derek Pearsall, though scholars no longer ascribe to Laura Hibbard Loomis' influential theory concerning the manuscript's production in a medieval bookshop (cited below), they still generally agree with her concerning its London origin: "The Auchinleck Manuscript Forty Years On," in *The Auchinleck Manuscript: New Perspectives*. Ed. Susanna Fein, (Suffolk, UK/Rochester, NY: York Medieval Press, 2016), 12.

⁸ Of the estimated 400 or so original leaves only 334 remain: Alison Wiggins, *The Auchinleck Manuscript*, National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1. <<http://auchinleck.nls.uk/index.html>>.

⁹ Arthur Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages: Forming Compilations of Medieval London*, (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 106.

¹⁰ These include: *The King of Tars*, *Guy of Warwick* (stanzas), and *Sir Beues of Hamtoun* (see table below).

As the table below illustrates, most of the damage done to Auchinleck’s romances falls into three categories: removed gatherings, evidenced mainly by texts that end or begin imperfectly; full-page excisions, for which stubs of varying sizes and shapes remain; and lacunae created when the illuminated miniatures that originally introduced the manuscript’s romances have been removed with near-surgical precision (see Table 7).¹¹ When whole gatherings have been removed, as with the opening portions of *Floris and Blancheflour* and *King Alisaunder*, the lack of leftover material leaves little evidence for analysis. When individual leaves have been removed, however, the condition of the remaining stubs reveals a great deal about the biblioclast’s intentions. For five of Auchinleck’s

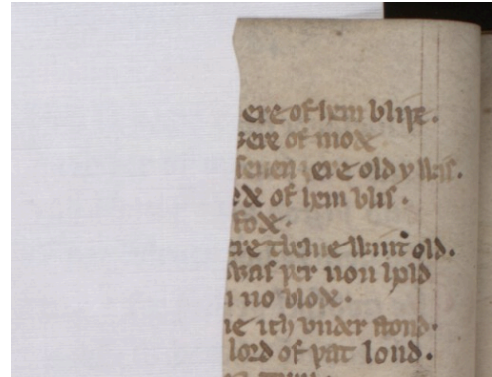


Figure 11: bifurcated leaf in *Amis and Amiloun*

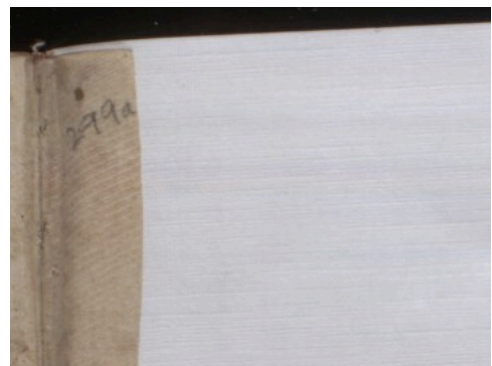


Figure 12: stub in *Sir Orfeo*

¹¹ This inventory is based on Derek Pearsall’s own count of eighteen romances within Auchinleck’s pages. However, I have placed a single asterisk “*” by those for which the genre seems dubiously applicable, either because the content suggests another genre or the fragmentary nature of the text makes it too difficult to judge. Some of these, such as *Ley la Freine* and *Sir Orfeo* would be more appropriately classified as “lais.” *Of Arthour & of Merlin* is much more of a chronicle than a romance and there is so little of *King Alisaunder* left that its genre can only be determined by comparison to other extant versions (and would therefore have been undecipherable to a post-biblioclast reader without access to these copies). I do not include changes or damage done to non-romance texts here, though there are many.

Table 7: An Inventory of Biblioclasms in the Auchinleck Manuscript's Romances

| Romance | Miniature Status | Details of Cuts |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>The King of Tars</i> † | Extant | None |
| <i>Amys and Amiloun</i> † | Stub | First and last leaves are stubs with some text, straight vertical cut |
| <i>Sir Degare</i> * | Lacuna | Lacuna cuts imprecise, last leaf is a stub with some rubrication, crooked but relatively vertical cut |
| <i>The Seven Sages of Rome</i> * | Stub | First leaf is last leaf of <i>Sir Degare</i> |
| <i>Floris and Blancheflour</i> | Missing leaves | Begins imperfect (in the middle of a description of equipment), no visible cuts |
| <i>Guy of Warwick (couplets)</i> | Stub | First leaf is a thin stub (no text), very straight cut, f.118 ^a removed (during a battle scene) leaving a jagged tear |
| <i>Guy of Warwick (stanzas)</i> | N/A | Entirely undamaged |
| <i>Reinbroun</i> | Extant | Final leaf missing (after f.175) |
| <i>Sir Beues of Hamtoun</i> | Extant | Undamaged (littera notabilior) |
| <i>Of Arthour & of Merlin</i> * | Lacuna | Lacuna cuts imprecise, otherwise undamaged |
| <i>Ley la Freine</i> * | Lacuna | Lacuna cuts moderately precise, last leaf is a stub with some text, crooked but relatively vertical cut (imperfect ending affects <i>Roland and Vernagu</i>) |
| <i>Roland and Vernagu</i> | Stub | First leaf is a stub with some text, crooked but relatively vertical cut |
| <i>Otuel a Knigt</i> | Lacuna | Lacuna cuts perfectly square, last leaves lost (no stubs) |
| <i>King Alisaunder</i> *† | Missing leaves | Extant leaves intact (but only constitute roughly half of the text) |
| <i>Sir Tristrem</i> | Lacuna | Lacuna cuts imprecise, otherwise undisturbed (though text ends imperfect) |
| <i>Sir Orfeo</i> * | Stub | First leaf is a very thin stub, cut is straight |
| <i>Horn Childe & Maiden Rinnild</i> | Lacuna | Lacuna cuts almost perfectly square, missing leaf mid-text (between f.321-2), last leaf missing, "caetera desunt" written on last extant leaf |
| <i>King Richard</i> *† | Extant | Leaves lost mid-text, no stubs extant |

*See footnote 11.

†The NLS has supplemented missing leaves in the online transcription.

romances, the first leaves have been excised with varying levels of precision, sometimes leaving a thin marginal stub with no text and other times with a less-than-straight vertical incision that bifurcates the marginal column of the damaged text. In *Amis and Amiloun*, the biblioclast has halved an entire column of text (Figure 11).¹² The first leaves of *The Seven Sages of Rome* and *Roland and Vernagu* have been treated similarly. Other cuts, such as the one made to remove the first leaf of *Sir Orfeo*, are remarkably straight and leave no text, suggesting a higher degree of care for the integrity of the text or even a more careful biblioclast (Figure 12).¹³

The varying degrees of care shown for the text in these full-leaf removals suggest that Auchinleck's biblioclasts were generally more interested in the manuscript's illuminated miniatures than in its literary content. These images would have introduced each individual text, usually by depicting their main characters in full color and often in full armor. Of the eighteen extant romance miniatures in Auchinleck, only four have avoided removal, including those which introduce *The King of Tars*, *Reinbroun*, *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, and *King Richard*.¹⁴ Aside from the more pious miniature in *The King of Tars*, these images depict their chivalric subjects in the armor and equipment that

¹² This affects the conclusion of "Speculum Gy de Warewyke" as well as the beginning of *Amis and Amiloun*, National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1, f.48^v.

¹³ *Sir Orfeo*, National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1, f.299^v.

¹⁴ This number represents Derek Pearsall's enumeration of Auchinleck's romances, although a number of these do not fit comfortably within the subcategory of chivalric romance. I have indicated these in the inventory below.

supports the ensuing narrative.¹⁵ Accordingly, these miniatures necessarily inform the texts' engagements with armorial discourse. In the *King Richard's* miniature, for instance, the king is depicted in mail, surcoat, kettle helm, and wielding his trademark Danish axe (Figure 13).¹⁶ Similarly, an illuminated



Figure 13: miniature in *King Richard*

littera notabilior “L” introduces *Sir Beues of Hamtoun* Beves in mail, surcoat, and visorless bascinet (Figure 14).¹⁷ This is the only example of such a littera notabilior in Auchinleck since most of the manuscript's miniatures are separated from the text by a frame. Beves is not separated from the text but actually occupies the first legible letter of the narrative, a visual element that actively incorporates the knight's



Figure 14: opening littera notabilior in *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*

armored body into the text of his romance and intertwines visual and literary textuality as well as chivalric and textual materiality. This introductory element also highlights the problem presented by the removal of these visual texts.

¹⁵ The miniature introducing *The King of Tars* offers a sequential diptych indicating the king's progression from idol worship (on the left side) to veneration of the crucifix (on the right). While Pearsall calls this text a romance it bears little in common with Auchinleck's more chivalric romances.

¹⁶ *King Richard*, National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1, f.326^r.

¹⁷ *Sir Beues of Hamtoun*, National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1, f.176^r. This is the only example of such a littera notabilior in Auchinleck.

In six of Auchinleck's romances, the miniature is the only thing to have been removed from the first leaf. These removals have left a series of rectangular lacunae that have been subsequently patched with cut-to-fit parchment fragments. These excisions have been made with varying degrees of care; some of the cuts are jagged and careless, sometimes even removing the top margin along with the art, while others, such as the miniature for *Horn Childe & Maiden Rinnild*, are almost perfectly square, carved with noticeable concern for the remaining text (Figure 15).¹⁸ While it



Figure 15: lacuna in *Horne Childe & Maiden Rinnild*

might be simple to read these losses as unfortunate damage that mars the pristineness of the textual object, the observable care with which these cuts are made indicates not mere haphazard plundering but a meaningful modification. In losing its miniatures, Auchinleck has not been marred or made lesser as a cultural artifact but has been worked upon, carved and trimmed into something much more indicative of the object's interaction with its readers. A pristine manuscript like the British Library's *Enchiridion* is also far more inert.

In her seminal work on the production of the Auchinleck manuscript, Laura Hibbard Loomis notes in passing that the manuscript's miniatures were removed by "vandals" but offers no further explanation of the goals and practices of these

¹⁸ *Horn Childe & Maiden Rinnild*, National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1, f.317^v.

biblioclasts.¹⁹ To date, none of the miniatures have resurfaced, but a few fragments of the romances have. One of these fragments offers an intriguing clue as to what the manuscript's biblioclasts had been seeking. At the high point of the King's growing conflict with the "Freyms men & of Griffouns" in *King Richard*, four leaves have been removed.²⁰ Unlike the manuscript's miniatures, these leaves have resurfaced as fragments in Edinburgh University Library MS 218 and St. Andrew's University Library MS PR 2065 R.4; they contain the lions' share of the first of two pitched battles in *King Richard*.²¹ This excision doubles a motif of carving that originates in the text itself. To spite Richard for his recent victory against the "Frenys" and "Griffouns," a Saracen emperor seizes Richard's messenger and "Car[fs] of his nose bi þe grist" [carved off his nose by the cartilage.]²² Reading these leaves in their fragmentary form makes readily apparent the parallel between the treatment of this man's face and the very page upon which this image of flayed flesh is recorded. The fact that this cut affecting a chivalric body has also been cut from the material body of which it had formerly been a part indicates the imbedded nature of chivalric disassembly in the Auchinleck manuscript's materiality. A similar excision of a battle scene has been made in the couplet *Guy of Warwick*. This missing fragment has not resurfaced as it has for *King Richard* but the

¹⁹ Laura Hibbard Loomis, "The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340" (*PMLA* 57.3: 1942) 598.

²⁰ Fragment of *King Richard*, Edinburgh University Library MS 218, f.3^r, 209.

²¹ These fragments account for the missing leaves between extant folios 326 and 327 in Auchinleck. Interestingly, they depict pitched battles in which the various arms and weapons of Richard's army figure prominently.

²² Fragment of *King Richard*, St Andrews University Library MS PR 2065 R.4., f.1^r, 421.

battle scenes bookending the excision suggests a similar parallel in which the bodies of combatants may have been carved and hacked in much the same way as the manuscript's leaves.²³

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “carve” as “to cut off; *to carve* (a limb) *from any one; to carve asunder, to carve in two, to carve in or to pieces; to carve* (a knight) *out of his armour.*”²⁴ The word itself straddles a border of signification between destruction and creation that complicates its use in the context of chivalric violence. In a literal sense, the Saracen emperor is defacing Richard's knight by destroying his facial features, but in a symbolic sense the emperor has, like a sculptor, crafted meaning through the removal of corporeal matter. The National Library of Scotland (NLS) has worked diligently to present the Auchinleck's texts in as complete a form as possible in their useful online transcriptions by supplementing lines from comparable texts or even digitally reassembling texts from recovered fragments owned by other archives. In the case of *King Richard* mentioned above, the digital transcription simply incorporates the Edinburgh and St. Andrew's fragments into the poem with headers and footnotes to indicate the inclusion. For the online reader, this textual reassembly has the effect of representing a whole text despite the realities of the physical book held by the NLS. Similar editorial choices have been made for other romances with non-Auchinleck

²³ The stub of f.118^f follows immediately after an extensive arming scene. The action returns mid-battle as Guy smashes and shatters the armor and shield of his opponent (f.119^f).

²⁴ “carve, v.1.b”. *OED Online*, (Oxford University Press, December 2016). The Middle English Dictionary offers a similar definition of the verb “kerven” (see below).

exemplars and variant texts.²⁵ For example, the NLS has also incorporated text from recovered fragments in *King Alisaunder* from London University Library MS 593 (fragments: L ff.1^{ra}-2^{vb}) and St Andrews University Library MS PR 2065 A.15 (fragments: S A.15 ff.1^{ra}-2^{vb}). Other texts original to Auchinleck remain irreparably fragmented and impossible to reassemble. The NLS's digital presentation of Auchinleck represents a kind of archival triage that preferences an approximation of wholeness over an acceptance of the manuscript's fragmentation. In much the same way that armor is designed to prevent damage to the chivalric body, the primary function of archival conservation is to halt the disintegration of books, to preserve a specific moment in history and guard the textual object from the damage caused by continuous use. Then again, a material object with minimal signs of wear and tear offers far fewer opportunities for examining the ways in which humans have interacted with it. As Jeremy Citrome explains at length, this same impulse to reform or repair is at work upon the medieval chivalric body.²⁶ In order to operate or be recognized as ideal, a knight's body must be whole and undamaged, pristine. Armor is the primary technology required to maintain this wholeness and must often absorb potential damage, often leaving it dented, tarnished, scarred, even carved. No battle-proven suit of armor ever remains shining and whole; its ability to routinely disintegrate each time the knight sallies forth is essential to medieval

²⁵ The NLS has also used exemplars to supplement missing lines or to account for imperfect copies when Auchinleck was created.

²⁶Jeremy J. Citrome, "Bodies that Splatter: surgery, chivalry and the Body in the Practica of John Arderne," (*Exemplaria* 13.1, 2001), 137-172.

armorial discourses. Therefore, chivalric meaning does not only occupy the shining, pristine suit of armor but is perhaps more fully-realized by damaged armor. In much the same way, a pristine, undamaged book like the British Library's *Enchiridion* manuscript mentioned above may not embody meaning in quite the same way that a book like the Auchinleck manuscript can, full of stubs and lacunae that evidence reader use and interaction, offering productive windows to discern textual and material meaning.

In his book *Fragments and Assemblages: Forming Compilations of Medieval London*, Arthur Bahr cautions against critical melancholy over the perceived incompleteness of medieval texts, asserting instead that the fragmentary nature of these texts offers even greater opportunities to read a given miscellany's or compilation's compositional and thematic interconnectivities.²⁷ Bahr notes in particular of the gaps that fragment medieval texts:

Those lacunae [...] become spaces for current and future interpretive activity since their 'true' cause is often as unknowable as the 'true' originary form that their existence has altered. A 'fragment' is thus an intentional incompleteness [...], an accidentally or mechanically produced absence [...], and that which, by reinforcing our frequent inability to be certain which of these we are beholding [...], generates the kind of critical engagement that keeps such objects lively and vital.²⁸

Bahr's premise is that incompleteness and fragmentation, rather than representing deficiency or incompleteness in medieval manuscripts, offer some of the most valuable focal points for analysis. We cannot know what has become of Auchinleck's miniatures

²⁷ Arthur Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages: Forming Compilations of Medieval London*, (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 44.

²⁸ Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 47.

or even exactly why its lacunae were created, but they remain part of the lively and vital text and our own experience as readers of the manuscript. In the case of *King Richard* discussed above, the removal of an entire battle scene suggests a readerly interest in combat, weapons and armor, and we might make similar conclusions concerning other removals such as the unrecovered battle scene in the couplet *Guy* mentioned above or the first folio of *Floris and Blanchefleur*, which appears to have initiated the narrative with an arming act.²⁹ Contrary to what many readers (including Auchinleck's digital editors) might assume, the very fragmentary nature of these chivalric assemblages is actually part of their textual and material stability.

In her article "Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and Other Works" Sarah Kay discusses the material relationships between parchment and the bodies depicted on them. Focusing particularly on the violence involved in preparing manuscript parchment, Kay notes:

These causes of damage—scraping, cutting, splitting, tearing, holing, stretching, drying out—are all processes that, inflicted on a living human body rather than on a dead animal, would be forms of torture. Folios bearing defects like these thus constitute a mute doubling of the kinds of suffering undergone by the protagonists of many of the texts that are written on them.³⁰

²⁹ *Floris and Blanchefleur*, National Library of Scotland Advocates' MS 19.2.1, f.100^r.

³⁰ Sarah Kay, "Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and Other Works" (*Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36.1, 2006), 36.

According to Kay, parchment leaves inherently bear the marks of violence, often administered by metallic tools during the preparation process.³¹ The reader's experience of any text written on parchment is accordingly an engagement with flayed skin. When the imagery of flaying is doubled in a manuscript text like the hagiography *The Life of Saint Bartholomew*, the focus of Kay's argument, the book itself becomes "cognizant of the limits of human design, and of the skin as a material reality."³² Kay highlights the inherent corporeality of medieval texts, especially those that both depict and exhibit damage to the bodies they represent. Medieval hagiographical martyrs share a great deal in common with knights in the sense that the very nature of their existence necessitates violent assaults on their bodies.³³ The main difference being that the knight is prepared for this assault and intends to survive it by virtue of the armor that covers every inch of his skin.³⁴

³¹ In her more recent book, Kay further highlights the crossover between texts depicting corporeal violence and the skin of the manuscript itself: Sarah Kay, *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

³² Kay, "Original Skin," 52.

³³ Andrew Lynch sees the "'torment, disintegration, and re-constitution' of [...] saint's bodies as operating parallel to those of the romance heroes": "Genre, Bodies, and Power in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108: King Horn, Havelok, and the South English Legendary," in *The Texts and Contexts of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108*, Kimberly K. Bell and Julie Nelson Couch eds., (Leiden, Netherlands/Boston: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2011), 178.

³⁴ On the other hand, one might say that the saints know themselves to be protected by the full armor of God, which is inventoried in Ephesians 6:11-17 in much the same way that some medieval chivalric armor is itemized. For the sake of argument, I make this distinction purely on a literal basis.

Kay focuses specifically on the cutaneous elements of the manuscript; armorial discourse appears to be secondary unless we also consider the non-parchment materials that cover the manuscript pages.³⁵ While animal skin parchment is the medium for Auchinleck's romances, the text itself does not exist without ink; the letters cover the surface of the parchment and the interlockings and interlacings of letters and narratives create a unified pattern which, in a material sense, articulates a barrier between the reader and the parchment and renders it a legible surface upon which knighthood is projected. Illuminated miniatures even more closely resemble armorial components in the sense that their images visually cover the skin of parchment with layers of color and sometimes (though not in Auchinleck) with beaten metal.³⁶ In this way, the flaying of the manuscript arguably corresponds well to the ways in which the mail armor of Auchinleck's knights is struck and carved.

Some of Auchinleck's knights demonstrate a partial awareness of their chivalric bodies' material transcendence. At one point in *Horn Childe & Maiden Rinnild*, after a particularly fierce combat, Horn is told by his fallen opponent, "In Walis lond is þer nan / Man ymade of flesche no ban / Ozain þe may stand" [In Welsh land there is no / Man made of flesh nor bone / That may stand against thee.]³⁷ On the surface, the vanquished

³⁵ In both "Original Skin" and *Animal Skins* Kay draws heavily on Didier Anzieu's simultaneously physical and metaphorical concept of the cutaneous in *The Skin Ego*.

³⁶ The process of creating gold leaf for medieval manuscript decoration was not unlike the plating process described in Chapter 2. The metal had to be hammered flat and shaped before it was applied to the parchment (read: skin).

³⁷ *Horn Childe & Maiden Rinnild* 637-639.

knight is merely confirming Horn's prowess and indicating that he is likely the most physically capable knight in the land. But if we read this knight's use of the negative against the materiality of the romance, we find that Horn himself may fall within a different corporeal category. Indeed, there is no man of flesh and bone that may stand against Horn because Horn himself is *not* a man of flesh and bone; he is a man of parchment and ink, and the materials of his body transcend the physicality of real chivalric combat. Immediately prior to this comment, Horn has subjected the body of the opposing knight to a particularly violent disassembly:

þe kniztes scheld he cleue atvo
& of his plates he brac þo
& frussed alle his side;
Out of his sadel he bar him þan,
He brac his arm & his schulderban,
He hadde a fal vnride.

[the knight's shield he cleaved in two
And of his plates he broke through
And smashed his whole side;
Out of his saddle he bore him then,
He broke his arm and his shoulder bone,
He had a fierce fall.]³⁸

Horn's ability to enact this violent disassemblage is a response to the opposing knight's challenge to Horn's corporeality. Surely a body capable of armor-cleaving blows would be strong of body, but calling attention to Horn's textuality in contrast to his physicality emphasizes a different form of corporeal stability, one more bound to the book than the body. This does not mean Horn's body is impervious; in fact, it is not Horn's flesh and

³⁸ *Horn Childe & Maiden Rinnild*, 628-633.

bone but his parchment and ink (which, as Kay suggests, correspond to one another) that is most vulnerable, making the removal of Horn's miniature akin to flaying the knight himself.

Kay's assertion makes room for the somewhat reaching but productive critical conceit of understanding a corpus of literary works in terms of chivalric corporeality. In this case, it is important to consider the nature of the medieval miscellany as a discrete body of texts unified, to a degree, by their content but also as a material assemblage.³⁹ Arthur Bahr defines the medieval miscellany as "a complex assemblage of textual parts that does not obligingly present readers with a clear program or straightforward purpose, and which different readers are therefore likely to perceive in meaningfully different ways."⁴⁰ In its current state, the Auchinleck manuscript contains forty-one separate texts, only eighteen of which can be classified as romances, but the romances take up two hundred thirty-two of the manuscript's three hundred thirty-one extant folios.⁴¹ All of these romances are written in Middle English and many of them detail the exploits of undeniably English heroes. This consistency of language and genre has led Thorlac Turville-Petre to refer to the manuscript as a "handbook of the nation" and for Derek

³⁹ Seth Lerer makes a distinction between the miscellany and the anthology, citing the presence of compilational intent mainly in the latter. Since most other scholars refer to Auchinleck as a miscellany, I opt not to adopt Lerer's term. "Bibliographical Theory," 21.

⁴⁰ Arthur Bahr, "Miscellaneity and variance in the medieval book," in *The Medieval Manuscript Book: Cultural Approaches*, Michael Johnston and Michael van Dussen eds. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 182.

⁴¹ This count does not include the recovered fragments in the Edinburgh and St. Andrew's libraries.

Pearsall to theorize that the book was commissioned by a social climber as a “great book of English romance.”⁴² Ralph Hanna has also identified Auchinleck’s romances as “the central core of the book.”⁴³ In this sense, the Auchinleck manuscript’s compilation and construction represents an attempt to stabilize a distinctly English corpus of chivalric heroism, one bolstered by the collected presence of folk heroes whose narratives replicate each other many times over within the pages of a single book.

Despite the manuscript’s prominence and the clear cultural implications of its miscellaneity, the Auchinleck romances have not always been highly regarded by critics. Ralph Hanna cites a long critical tradition of dismissing medieval romance due to its contemporary popularity and unsophisticated narratives.⁴⁴ Ken Eckert identifies a similar trend in past scholarship, citing particularly the early work of Derek Pearsall and Albert C. Baugh.⁴⁵ Some of these accusations cite the redundant nature of the exile-return motif common in insular romance.⁴⁶ Indeed, the various narratives of Guy, Reinbroun, Horn,

⁴² Cited by Wiggins: Thorlac Turville-Petre, *England the Nation: Language, Literature, and National Identity 1290-1340* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). See also: Derek Pearsall, “The Auchinleck Manuscript Forty Years On,” in *The Auchinleck Manuscript: New Perspectives*, Susanna Fein ed. (Suffolk, UK/Rochester, NY: York Medieval Press, 2016), 23.

⁴³ Hanna, *London Literature*, 104.

⁴⁴ Hanna, *London Literature*, 107.

⁴⁵ Ken Eckert, “Numerological and Structural Symbolism in the Auchinleck Stanzaic Guy of Warwick” (*English Studies* 95.8, 2014), 853. It is worth noting the relative age of these works: Pearsall (1965), Baugh (1959); modern scholars are far less dismissive of popular fiction.

⁴⁶ Discussed extensively in Susan Crane’s *Insular Romance*, these popular narratives almost always focus on a noble protagonist’s loss of position, his travels abroad, and his ultimate return to reclaim his place.

and Beves are strikingly similar both in and outside the Auchinleck Manuscript. When romances are read as individual texts, this simply suggests the consistency of convention in their composition, but in the context of medieval miscellanies that compile many of these narratives into a single volume, this consistency transforms individual romances into a redundant body of works that maintain the stability of the material whole. Bahr has recently argued that contemporary readers of medieval miscellanies would not have perceived the separation between individual texts the way modern readers might, instead reading the whole book as unified and stable as a direct function of its compilation.⁴⁷ This does not mean that the manuscript itself is an inherently stable object. As Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen note, the medieval manuscript is a process just as much as it is an object since it can be added to or taken away from at different times.⁴⁸ To the modern reader such liquidity or mutability of form might suggest a problematic instability, but just as chivalric bodies maintain stability through cyclical arming and disarming, so too does the material assemblage of the premodern miscellaneous book represent a corpus of cultural identity made legible and stable through repetition and redundancy. In fact, the miscellaneous manuscript appears built to withstand harsh treatment both compositionally and materially. The simple redundancy of exile-and-return motifs, the repetition of combat imagery, even the collection of English chivalric

⁴⁷ Bahr, "Miscellaneity and Variance," 181-198.

⁴⁸ Michael Johnston and Michael Van Dussen, "Introduction: Manuscripts and Cultural History" in *The Medieval Manuscript Book: Cultural Approaches* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 4.

heroes like Guy, Beves, and Horn that closely mirror each other in narrative form and contemporary popularity, guards against the loss of a miniature or a leaf here and there, even if the missing page contained a climactic battle scene. When one of these is removed by the biblioclast another remains, not necessarily because the compiler was compelled to collect like narratives but as a system of assembled redundancy that maintains a curated image of English knighthood in a manuscript uncannily aware of its own material future.

Armorial Anxiety and Incisive blows in the *Guy of Warwick* Triptych

In addition to identifying romances as the central core of the Auchinleck Manuscript, Ralph Hanna agrees with past scholars who have identified *Guy of Warwick* as one of the most exemplary romances in the book.⁴⁹ In actuality, Auchinleck contains three romances that relate to Guy of Warwick: the couplet *Guy of Warwick*, the stanzaic *Guy of Warwick*, and *Reinbroun*.⁵⁰ All three appear to have been written by different authors and at different times but, have been compiled one after the other, forming a sort of triptych that forms both the physical and thematic center of the book. In its microassemblage of texts within the larger book, its material fragmentation, and its

⁴⁹ Hanna, *London Literature*, 129-130.

⁵⁰ A third text titled *Speculum Gy de Warewyke* appears earlier in Auchinleck, but it is disconnected from the *Guy* triptych and its contents indicate a spiritual meditation with little to no involvement of Guy's chivalric character.

textual treatment of chivalric disassembly, the *Guy* triptych offers a concentrated example of Auchinleck's engagement with armorial discourse.

As one of the longest romances in the Auchinleck MS, the relative wholeness of the *Guy* triptych is remarkable, especially considering the contemporary popularity of *Guy*.⁵¹ It seems almost inevitable that some part of the *Guy of Warwick* would be damaged, modified, or removed in the intervening four hundred years between its creation and conservation. The only material element missing in the entire triptych is the first folio of the couplet *Guy* (Figure 16).⁵²

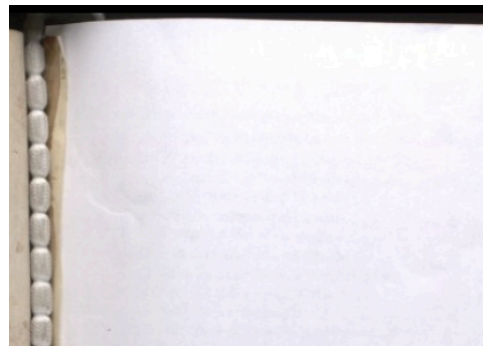


Figure 16: Stub of the couplet *Guy*'s first leaf

This wholeness is an opportunity to consider what may have been lost in the rest of the manuscript and to assess the degree to which these losses have actually affected the stability of Auchinleck's chivalric subjects. Despite the removal of the first leaf and a later leaf depicting a battle scene in the couplet *Guy*, the extant leaves provide plenty of the texts to assess the general rhythm of their protagonists' repetitive combat encounters.

⁵¹ Wiggins attributes the inspiration for *Reinbroun* to this popularity. "Imagining the Compiler: Guy of Warwick and the Compilation of the Auchinleck Manuscript," in *Imagining the Book*, Stephen Kelly and John J. Thompson eds. (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepolis, 2005), 70.

⁵² *Guy of Warwick*, f.107^r. This image shows the top of what would have been the first leaf of the poem. A white sheet of modern paper has been added in the image to distinguish the stub from the following leaf. Folio 108, which immediately follows this stub, contains two columns of forty-four lines each. Other miniatures in the MS tend to occupy the equivalent of about ten to eighteen lines of poetry, depending on their size. Thus, we can guess that we have lost 160-170 lines of poetry, less than 3% of the couplet *Guy*'s 6,922 extant lines.

Ken Eckert codifies the narrative structures of these encounters as follows: the knights crash together, all the jewels fly off armor, spear breaks/horse is killed, both knights fight as if crazed, prayers for help, opponent taunts hero, opponent's limb chopped off, enemy decapitated.⁵³ While Eckert's argument focuses primarily on the numerological symbolism in *Guy's* combat sequences, armor and its interaction with chivalric bodies is integral to his assessment. Eckert insists that this narrative consistency, which some have dismissed as repetitive, is key to understanding the stanzaic *Guy*. This repetition is furthermore key to the whole manuscript's engagement with medieval romance armorial discourses.

The narrative of the quintessentially English hero Guy of Warwick represents one of the most substantial entries in the Auchinleck Manuscript, occupying sixty-seven of the manuscript's three hundred thirty-four leaves. The Guy matter is made up of three separate narratives foliated one after the other. The couplet *Guy of Warwick* details the hero's early chivalric exploits, including the slaying of a dragon and his ultimate marriage to Felice. The stanzaic *Guy of Warwick* involves Guy's departure from home in search of a spiritual meaning to his knightly abilities. *Reinbroun*, the third and last entry in Auchinleck's Guy-mythos, is set after Guy's death and details the kidnapping and retrieval of his son Reinbroun by Guy's bosom-friend Heraud. Each narrative is self-

⁵³ Eckert, "Numerological and Structural Symbolism," 852-3.

contained and each appears to have been composed separately from the others.⁵⁴

However, both their subject matter and organization demonstrate a strong linearity and interrelation between all three. Allison Wiggins notes the close connections between the thematic elements of each text, which represent “efficient networks of textual exchange” between regions of literary production in medieval England.⁵⁵ Though written separately, each poet and their Auchinleck compilers seemed to be operating with a common conception of medieval English heroic folklore. Wiggins sees this commonality as indicative of the compiler’s intention to create a whole, continuous narrative out of the Guy romances.⁵⁶ Eckert goes so far as to suggest a Trinitarian continuum based on the concurrent foliation of all three romances.⁵⁷ Accordingly, I consider these three romances a representative microassemblage within the larger miscellaneous assemblage of the whole Auchinleck manuscript.⁵⁸ The following discussion addresses the ways in which each of these three components of the Guy Triptych depict armor, demonstrate a chivalric anxiety concerning the efficacy of armor, and ultimately destroy armor with meaningful precision.

⁵⁴ Wiggins, “Imagining the Compiler,” 68. Wiggins reiterates an argument originally made by Loomis concerning the reorganization and compilation of the *Guy* romances: “The Auchinleck Manuscript and a Possible London Bookshop of 1330-1340,” 610.

⁵⁵ Wiggins, “Imagining the Compiler,” 73.

⁵⁶ Wiggins, “Imagining the Compiler,” 73.

⁵⁷ Eckert, “Numerological and Structural Symbolism,” 855.

⁵⁸ Siobhain Bly Calkin argues for the diptych structure of Auchinleck’s *Roland and Vernagu* and *Otuel a Knigt*. She makes a similar assertion concerning *Guy of Warwick*’s first two parts but I would argue for the inclusion of *Reinbroun* in this image: “Endings in the Auchinleck Manuscript,” in *The Auchinleck Manuscript: New Perspectives*, Susanna Fein ed., (Suffolk, UK/Rochester, NY: York Medieval Press, 2016), 170-2.

Though the creation of the Auchinleck Manuscript is roughly contemporary to the composition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the armor depicted in it (both textually and visually) more easily compares to the armor depicted in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes. In fact, the Auchinleck contains a faithful example of the armor the *Guy* poets might have been imagining on the first page of *Reinbroun* (Figure 17).⁵⁹ The miniature depicts Reinbroun striking the helm of Earl Amys, an episode that appears toward the closing of the romance. Both knights wear full suits of mail armor (hauberk, chausses, and coif) covered by cloth surcoats (blue for Reinbroun and red for Amys). Reinbroun appears to be wearing a kettle helm while his opponent wears a visorless bascinet; similar equipment is depicted throughout the *Guy* romances and in a number of other romances in Auchinleck.⁶⁰ Reinbroun also bears a shield, though it is difficult to discern the type depicted. Amys' targe, on the other hand, is fully visible dangling from his left arm in a fatally non-defensive position.⁶¹



Figure 17: Reinbroun fighting Amys

⁵⁹ *Reinbroun*, f.167^r.

⁶⁰ In fact, the miniature in *King Richard* depicts the king in remarkably similar armor: f.323^r.

⁶¹ As with many of the elements of armor throughout Auchinleck, the targe shows up in a number of other narratives, most notably when wielded by the Saracen giant Vernagu in *Roland and Vernagu*.

This type of armorial technology is relatively consistent throughout the *Guy Triptych*, although it is only rarely detailed during an arming act. Instead, we can reconstruct the equipment of *Guy*, *Reinbroun*, and *Heraud* via its use during narrated combat. In the couplet *Guy*, the protagonist is struck with a lance during his first tournament combat, and the poet notes that “þe hauberk was gode & failed nouȝt” [the hauberk was good and failed not.]⁶² The poet regularly calls attention to *Guy*’s hauberk or *brinie* (used interchangeably), his “helme,” and his “scheld.”⁶³ The specific elements of armor appear most often when they are the targets of strokes delivered in combat, when a “hauberk was torent” [hauberk was torn], or when a stroke falls “on þe helme briȝt” [on the bright helm.]⁶⁴ This second motif of armor’s “briȝt”-ness is continued in *Reinbroun*, a narrative similarly sparse in arming acts but abundant in descriptions of armor’s combat-functionality. The tale of *Guy*’s son and his bosom friend *Heraud* (who appears in the couplet *Guy* but not the stanzaic *Guy*) participates in this armorial refrain when both protagonists perform chivalric deeds, “Wiþ helm on heued & brinie briȝt” [with helm on head and byrnie bright.]⁶⁵ For the most part, the armor depicted in

⁶² *Reinbroun*, National Library of Scotland Advocates’ MS 19.2.1, 708.

⁶³ The words appear in the romance in the following counts: “helme” twenty-nine times, “hauberk” twenty times, “brini” six times, and “scheld” forty-seven times.

⁶⁴ These specific examples come from lines 6889 and 4875 but represent recurrent motifs for describing armor mid-combat.

⁶⁵ 487. This phrase appears with the most frequency in *Horn Child & Maiden Rinnild*. The full phrase itself appears only once in *Reinbroun*, but the “briȝt”-ness of armorial components is mentioned in numerous combinations of helm, sword, shield, or hauberk throughout the romance, usually in reference to *Reinbroun* or *Heraud*.

Reinbroun is consistent with the couplet *Guy* and with the illuminated miniature that appears in the Auchinleck MS: hauberk, helm, and shield.

While plate armor is never mentioned in the couplet *Guy* or in *Reinbroun*, Guy's armor in the stanzaic *Guy* represents a much later period of armorial technology, since, in addition to the mail hauberk ("brini"), Guy is now armed with plates, perhaps something similar to the hybrid "coat armes" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.⁶⁶ Guy's whole suit is detailed when he prepares to fight the giant Amourant on behalf of King Triamour:

Gij was ful wele in armes diȝt
Wiȝ helme & plate & brini briȝt
Be best þat euer ware.
Be hauberk he hadde was Renis
Þat was king Clarels, ywis,
In Ierusalem when he was þare.⁶⁷

[Guy was well-dressed in arms
With helm and plate and byrnie bright
The best that ever were.
The hauberk he had was Rhenish
That was king Charles', truly,
In Jerusalem when he was there.]

Guy's armor is detailed extensively and includes a German-made hauberk, the "brini briȝt," another iteration of this motif. Guy's outfit also includes a well-proven helm with a ventail, a sword previously owned by Hector of Troy, and an impenetrable hose-gambeson combination.⁶⁸ This armorial pedigree serves to emphasize the planned

⁶⁶ Both manuscripts have been dated to the mid-to-late fourteenth century.

⁶⁷ *Guy of Warwick* (stanzas), 8004-9.

⁶⁸ *Guy of Warwick* (stanzas), 8007, 8022-4, 8028-9, 8034-9, respectively. It is also worth mentioning that the hose, which I understand to be mail chausses, are mentioned to be as

imperviousness of Guy's equipment. Interestingly, *Reinbroun* makes no mention of the plate armor seen in the stanzaic *Guy*, supporting Wiggins' assertion that *Reinbroun* represents a response to the popularity of the couplet *Guy*.⁶⁹

The *Guy* romances operate with much the same level of armorial technology discussed in Chapter one, indicating some similarities between twelfth-century France and fourteenth-century England with regard to the practical operations of this armor. The mail hauberk or byrnie was easy to take on and off, was flexible, and its woven rings created a visually-uniform surface across the entire suit. Its construction would have involved the minute linking of miniscule components rather than the violent smashing necessary for producing plate. Most importantly, its shape would have mimicked the form of the chivalric body it protected. In the *Guy* triptych in particular, the frequent mention of armor's brightness or planned effectiveness reveals an intriguing attention to armor's pre-combat pristineness. A suit of armor, plate or mail, would only be "brizt," polished, and well-repared before combat, where the grime, the blood, and the violent destructive strokes of combat scar armorial surfaces and ruin its pristine wholeness. The *Guy* romances still narrate this destruction, but the refrain of armor's "brizt"-ness reveals an ever-present anxiety over armor's eventual (and arguably expected) disintegration.

The anxiety of disassemblage permeates each romance in the *Guy* Triptych, and all three of its protagonists feel a need to perform wholeness even when the realities of

impervious to weapons as to flint, indicating an intriguing consistency of imagery with the later *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*.

⁶⁹ Wiggins, "Imagining the Compiler," 70.

combat interfere. At one point while Guy and Heraud are fighting three Lombard knights, one of his opponents named Gwissard requests Guy's surrender by calling attention to the protagonist's disintegrating chivalric body:

zeld now þe,
It no may no noþer be.
On þe erþe liþe þi scheld todreued,
Nouzt o pece is wiþ oþer bileued,
& þine helme is al tohewe,

þine hauberk torent þat was newe,
& wounded þou art, þou miȝt wele se.⁷⁰

[Yield now thee
It no other way may be
On the earth lieth thy shield in bits
No one piece is with another left
And thine helm is all hewn
Thine hauberk rent that was new
And wounded thou art, thou might well see.]

Keenly aware of the typical romance association of chivalric wholeness with performative efficacy, this antagonist verbally disassembles Guy according to an inventory of his failing gear. In this moment, with his knightly body falling apart around him, Guy must question his ability to maintain chivalric signification. He defiantly resists, saying “To zeld me to þe is nouzt mi wille / þer whiles ichaue mi swerd ygrounde / & mi body wiþouten wounde” [To yield me to thee is not my will / while I have my sharpened sword / And my body is without wound.]⁷¹ Despite appearances, Guy insists on the wholeness of his body, suggesting this armorial disintegration is actually not

⁷⁰ *Guy of Warwick* (couplets), 1285-91.

⁷¹ *Guy of Warwick* (couplets), 1296-8.

indicative of corporeal destruction but rather demonstrative of the knight's participation in chivalric labor. Guy's response does not represent a denial of fact so much as an insistence upon the stability of his chivalric corporeality. He is not actively disintegrating, which would suggest the ultimate failure of corporeal wholeness; he simply bears the outward indication that his armor has been used.

As mentioned above, the stanzaic *Guy* does more than its fellows to insist on the quality and imperviousness of Guy's armor. Guy's opponent is, nevertheless, a foil to the English knight's equipment. When the giant Amourant draws, the poet describes his sword as a:

gode brond
þat wele carf al þat it fond
When he hadde lorn his launce.
þat neuer armour miȝt wiþstond
þat was made of smithes hond
In heþenese no in Fraunce.⁷²

[good sword
that could carve all that it found
When he had left aside his lance.
That sword, no armor might withstand
That was made by smith's hand
Neither in heathen lands nor in France.]

Amourant's sword is described as unstoppable by any armorial equipment in the known world, but this description comes less than fifty lines after Guy's equipment is described as: "Nas neuer wepen þat euer was make / þat o schel miȝt þerof take / Namore þan of þe flint" [There is no weapon that ever was made / That from it one bit might take / No more

⁷² *Guy of Warwick* (stanzas), 8088-93.

than does the flint.]⁷³ This armor is so hard and impervious to damage that no part of it could be carved or struck away; its metallurgical assemblage is complete and static, even if struck with a flint.⁷⁴ Only one of these descriptions can be true, and the ensuing combat gives Guy more reason to doubt his armor than Amourant has to doubt his sword when the plates and hauberks of both combatants are “ret & riue” [rent and riven.]⁷⁵ Guy may not embody the kind of anxiety with which he responds to Gwissard in the couplet *Guy*, but the text itself deconstructs Guy’s armorial wholeness in spite of the combatants’ verbal posturing.

Closely following the stanzaic *Guy* both thematically and textually, *Reinbroun* offers a similar posturing of armorial wholeness with the important variation of combat between two protagonists, Reinbroun and Heraud, who battle incognito. At one point Heraud halts the combat to inquire after his opponent’s name. Reinbroun responds disdainfully:

‘Sire olde man’ þanne seide he,
 ‘For a coward ich holde þe.
 Min armes beþ al sonde,
 Me strokes beþ sene on þin helm cler:
 Out of þe scheld ichaue a quarter
 Yfeld to þe grounde.’
 Heraud seide ‘me frend fre,
 Þei min armes apeired be,
 Me bodi naþ no wounde.’⁷⁶

⁷³ *Guy of Warwick* (stanzas), 8037-9.

⁷⁴ Metallurgically, this might even suggest a metal that has been worked to the point of absolute purity and strength. I address this process at length in Chapter 2.

⁷⁵ *Guy of Warwick* (stanzas), 8168.

⁷⁶ *Reinbroun*, 721-9.

['Sir old man' then said he,
'For a coward I hold thee.
My arms are all sound,
My strokes have seen to thine shining helm:
Out of thy shield I have a quarter
Felled to the ground.'
Heraud said 'my friend free,

Though my arms pared be,
My body hath no wound']

Despite the clear destruction their combat has wrought, both combatants insist on the integrity of their bodies. Reinbroun even calls attention to the relative dimensions of Heraud's shield that have been cut away and Heraud himself admits that his armor has been "apeired." The *Middle English Dictionary* defines the verb "apeiren" as an action intended to damage or hasten deterioration.⁷⁷ Reinbroun himself insists not only on the integrity of his body but his armor as well, even though the shields and helms of both combatants are collectively "cleueþ" in the preceding combat narration. This passage represents a central anxiety consistent throughout all three panels of the *Guy of Warwick* triptych and many of the Auchinleck romances as well. Heraud asserts that pieces of his equipment, extensions of his chivalric self, can be cut away piece by piece without damaging the central integrity of the institution his armor and performance represent. However, both Heraud and Reinbroun's need to posture this integrity is self-defeating and calls into question the certitude of their claims in a way that has been inherited from the couplet and stanzaic *Guys*.

⁷⁷ "apeiren," v., *Middle English Dictionary* (University of Michigan, 24 April 2013).

The language of chivalric violence is remarkably consistent throughout the *Guy* triptych; swords are regularly employed in cutting or slicing armor, often into discreetly smaller segments. During his fight with the Lombard knights in the couplet *Guy* (quoted above), Gwissard describes Guy's shield as "todreued," his helm as "al tohewe," and his hauberk as "torent."⁷⁸ Despite Guy's denial of bodily injury, Gwissard continues his assault:

Gwichard smot Gij wiþ michel miȝt
Opon þe helme þat schon so briȝt
Þat a quarter out fleye;
þe kniȝt was boþe queynt & sleye.
Opon his scholder þat swerd glod
Of his hauberk it tok a pece brod.⁷⁹

[Gwissard smote Guy with great might
Upon the helm that shone so bright
That a quarter flew out;
The knight was both skillful and sly.
Upon his shoulder that sword slid
Of his hauberk it took a broad piece.]

The language of this combat is appropriate to the temporal conception of mail armor. Just as in *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*, combat is measured not so much by the effects on the chivalric body beneath armor but by its effects on the armor. However, this hewing, rending, and quartering contrasts sharply to the gross beating of plate armor we see in the latter romance. The combat in *Guy of Warwick* emphasizes the sword's cutting edge and its ability to score, stroke, and slice the armor it strikes.

⁷⁸ *Guy of Warwick* (couplets), 1287-89.

⁷⁹ *Guy of Warwick* (couplets), 1299-1304.

This motif continues in the stanzaic *Guy of Warwick*, which further increases the precision of these chivalric cuts. Early in the battle between Guy and Amourant it appears that the giant has the advantage when:

To Gij a strok he rauȝt
& hit him on þe helme so briȝt
þat al þe floures fel down riȝt
Wiþ a ful grimly draȝt.
þe cercle of gold he carf ato
& forþ wiþ his dint also
þer beleued it nouȝt;
On þe scheld þe swerd down fel
& cleue it into haluendel;
Almost to grounde him brouȝt.⁸⁰

[To Guy a stroke he gave
And hit him on the helm so bright
That all the flowers fell right down
With a fierce blow.
The circlet of gold he carved in two
With this blow also
That it could be believed not;
On the shield the sword down fell
And cleft it in half;
Almost to the ground he was brought]

Much of the violence of chivalric combat is concussive, even explosive, but here the poet is particularly attentive to the cutting edge of Amourant's sword as it carves Guy's helm and shield. This violence is precise, as the poet indicates the helm being carved "ato" or "in two," implying that this piece of armor has been bifurcated or split down the middle, creating two halves of a whole.⁸¹ The shield also is cleaved "haluendel" or "in half"

⁸⁰ *Guy of Warwick* (stanzas), 8174-83.

⁸¹ "atwo, adv." *Middle English Dictionary*, (University of Michigan, 24 April 2013). Guy later returns this blow with the exact same language (8200).

precisely reducing it to equal parts.⁸² These blows do not merely smash with brute force but score meaningful lines of separation across the knights' protective surfaces. The words "carf" and "cleve" also indicate not merely concussive blows but strokes purposefully aimed at removing chivalric matter. As noted above, the *OED* definition of "carved" includes the sense of removing a knight from his armor. The *Middle English Dictionary* defines the verb "kerven" as a cut or pierce performed with a sharp instrument. The *MED* also mentions an additional sense of surgical incision, which I find apt for describing the effect of blades upon Auchinleck's pages.⁸³

The apparent success of these blows is also surprising considering the stated imperviousness of Guy's armor. The relative attention the poet pays to Guy's arming and violent disarming indicates the crafting of meaning through fragmentation, provided this fragmentation can be halted or stabilized before it continues toward full disintegration. We see such disintegration when Amourant is defeated after Guy slices off the giant's hands and unlaces his helm before beheading him.⁸⁴ Despite his armor having been repeatedly bisected with near-surgical precision, Guy's body remains unfragmented. This is the key difference between Guy and his opponent, and also the material eventuality against which the poem positions itself. The imagery of disintegration in Guy's later combats with Beraud and Colbrand operate much the same way, not only serving to

⁸² "halven-del(e), adj." *Middle English Dictionary*, (University of Michigan, 24 April 2013).

⁸³ "kerven, v." *Middle English Dictionary*, (University of Michigan, 24 April 2013).

⁸⁴ *Guy of Warwick* (stanzas), 8507, 8518. This blow is strikingly reminiscent of Lancelot's final battle with Meleagant in *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*

reiterate the wholeness of Guy's body in spite of his armorial disintegration, but also offering a redundant plot structure that guards the romance against potential disassemblage.

While armor appears frequently throughout *Reinbroun*, it is almost never in the context of an arming act, appearing instead almost exclusively in the heat of combat such as when the dual protagonists Heraud and Reinbroun unknowingly fight each other:

Hii cleueþ helm & scheldes bo,
Gret fiȝt þer was betwene hem to
In þat ilche tide.
Þai hewe þe scheldes of gode entaile,
Be hauberk of so gode a maile
Teborsten be boþe side.⁸⁵

[He cleaved helm and shields both,
A great fight there was between them two
In that same time.
They hewed the shields of good make,
The hauberk of such good mail
Burst on both sides]

Here we recognize the usual elements of the hauberk, shield, and helm being “cleueþ” and “hewe” with particular emphasis on their quality. The couplet doubles down on this emphasis, describing a shield of “gode entaile” and a hauberk of “gode maile.” The inability of these quality components to maintain their wholeness during combat emphasizes the strength and prowess of the combatants. This results of this violence have the added effect of normalizing armorial disintegration an expected result of combat,

⁸⁵ *Reinbroun*, 655-60.

even if the armor is of exceptional quality. For most of the antagonists in *Reinbroun*, combat results in shattered shields, rent hauberks, and even helms “al toschliue.”⁸⁶

At this point it is worth revisiting *Reinbroun*'s miniature (Figure 16, above), which depicts Reinbroun in combat against Amys, the romance's only major antagonist. In addition to the visual inventory of armorial elements that is later supported by the text, Amys' shield offers another intriguing connection to the armorial discourse offered by the text. While the protective surface of Reinbroun's shield is visible, Amys has exposed the back side of his shield, which is bisected by a crossbar. This line visually preempts the damage that is already occurring to his helmet in this image and that ultimately occurs to the shield in the narrative: “Helm and scheld þat stronge were / þai gonne hem al *toschliue*” [the helm and shield that were strong / they made them all to split.]⁸⁷ The *Middle English Dictionary* defines the verb “sliven,” from which “toschliue” is derived, as “to split, cleave.”⁸⁸ The sense of this word indicates a whole being broken down into pieces. Anxiety over the violent results of combat, specifically of being cut, cleaved, bifurcated, or otherwise separated from the constituent parts of the corporeal self is pervasive throughout the *Guy* romances and the Auchinleck Manuscript in general.

If there is a central irony to the persistent imagery of carving that appears in the *Guy* triptych, it is that the *Guy* romances are some of the most intact texts in the entire

⁸⁶ This phrase appears during Reinbroun's combat with Amys in the last episode of the narrative: *Reinbroun*, 1260.

⁸⁷ *Reinbroun*, 1259-60. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁸ “slīven, v.” *Middle English Dictionary*, (University of Michigan, 24 April 2013).

Auchinleck manuscript. Aside from the first leaf and one later leaf of the couplet *Guy*, the *Guy* romances have suffered almost none of the damage that afflicts the textual bodies of most of Auchinleck's romance knights. Almost every other romance in the manuscript has been subjected to some form of damage that threatens the stability of both the text and the chivalric subject it depicts.⁸⁹ Fortunately, the armorial discourse embodied by and embedded in the Auchinleck manuscript works in tandem to maintain the stability of its chivalric subjects, despite the attempts that have been made to "carve" them out.

As I have discussed in my previous chapters, a knight's use of armor automatically assumes the eventuality of injury in combat. This is precisely what armor is designed for: to maintain the wholeness of the chivalric body. As I have explained above, however, the disintegration of armor still comments on the integrity of the body beneath it, and the knight is acutely aware of the problems a carved suit of armor poses to his chivalric identity. The sword strokes that separate armor from itself threaten this wholeness, even if they are ultimately incapable of destroying the knight altogether. In their respective narratives, both *Guy* and *Reinbroun* are able to insist on the stability of their chivalric bodies in the face of armorial disintegration because enough of their respective bodies and equipment remains to maintain their legibility as chivalric subjects. The links of mail are redundant enough to fill in the blanks for knightly signification even when parts of the hauberk have been cut away. Just as *Guy*, *Reinbroun*, and *Heraud*

⁸⁹ In addition to the stanza *Guy* and *Reinbroun*, *The King of Tars* and *Sir Beues of Hamtoun* are the only exceptions to this, being wholly untouched and textually complete.

manage to maintain the integrity of their knightly heroism despite the disintegration of their equipment, so too does the Auchinleck manuscript's conception of a distinctly English knighthood maintain its integrity despite its own material fragmentation. As a manuscript miscellany that compiles and collects numerous iterations of knighthood, the Auchinleck Manuscript is capable of withstanding a significant amount of damage without losing the essence of the chivalric institution it preserves. The manuscript still demonstrates a keen awareness of the potential for fragmentation but guards against it through the redundant layering of chivalric corpora within a single material corpus.

Authorial Miscellaneity

Few medieval miscellanies have escaped some degree of damage. For example, Bodleian Library MS Laud 108 and Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 61, both of which represent significant compendiums of medieval romance, have, like the Auchinleck manuscript, been subjected to similar levels of disassembly. The eventuality of damage and removal is practically assumed in the design and construction of the medieval manuscript miscellany. Even Geoffrey Chaucer, who lived and worked in close geographical proximity to Auchinleck, demonstrates a playful awareness of the medieval miscellany's indeterminate materiality in the planned-incompleteness of *The Canterbury Tales*, itself a kind of meta-miscellany.⁹⁰ Robert J. Meyer-Lee argues against treating

⁹⁰ Pearsall mentions the early twentieth-century critical trend that sought to connect Chaucer with Auchinleck, but admits the relative inconclusiveness of these arguments: "The Auchinleck Manuscript Forty Years On," 23.

what he calls the “fragments representation” of the *Canterbury Tales* as an indication of its deficiency or even of Chaucer’s inability or unwillingness to complete a planned project. Meyer-Lee asserts that, by virtue of an overwhelming *lack* of evidence for a larger plan to the *Canterbury Tales*, “the possibility emerges that Chaucer was content to leave some tales juxtaposed without a link, a scenario which the fragments representation effaces.”⁹¹ Meyer-Lee’s argument responds to the tendency for Chaucer scholars to consider the extant texts of the *Tales* as inherently deficient; such views preclude other possibilities for reading the text, such as the idea that Chaucer may have been interacting with textual miscellaneity.

Arthur Bahr notes three examples of authorial fragmentation in the *Tales*: the Franklin’s interruption of the *Squire’s Tale*, the Host’s interruption of pilgrim-Chaucer’s *Tale of Thopas*, and the apparent incompleteness of the *Cook’s Tale*. These first two examples are directly chivalric. The Squire is a clear member of the fighting estate, and cutting his narrative short is akin to fragmenting his chivalric body. The ridiculous armor of Chaucer’s Thopas has been discussed at length in Chapter 2, but it is worth noting that in addition to the narrative fragmentation caused by the host’s interruption, Thopas’ absurd armorial miscellany adopts a more ridiculous and critical perspective on the cultural capital of armorial discourse. Short of pulling out their own knives and carving up the text, by interrupting the *Squire’s Tale* and *The Tale of Thopas* and creating

⁹¹ Robert J. Meyer-Lee, “Abandon the Fragments” (*Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 35: 2013), 60.

artificially imperfect endings, Chaucer's Franklin and Host act as internal biblioclasts who artificially replicate the conditions anticipated in the Auchinleck romances.

Additionally, in the Hengwrt Manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*, Bahr explains, the scribe draws particular attention to the tale's incompleteness by noting "Of this Cokes tale maked Chaucer na moore."⁹² According to Bahr, the attention drawn to this lack is precisely what makes the fragmentary nature of this tale legible and significant. In the case of *The Cook's Tale*, the reader's comfort with Chaucer's identity as both author and pilgrim, as well as the scribe's explanation that Chaucer either did not finish or never meant to finish the tale tidies up what would otherwise seem incomplete. Fragmentary texts like those within the Auchinleck Manuscript appear to represent an incompleteness that is less authorial and more biblioclastic. A similar moment to the scribe's note in Hengwrt appears on the last extant leaf of *Horn Childe & Maiden Rimnild*. The romance ends mid-narrative, but rather than leave this excision ambiguous, a post-eighteenth-century italic hand has written in pencil the Latin phrase "caetera desunt" [the rest is missing] (Figure 9).⁹³ While we might not be able to read this note in quite the same way that Bahr notes of the scribe's note in Hengwrt, the impulse to clarify Auchinleck's lack similarly indicates a valuable self-awareness of fragmentation both on the part of Auchinleck's readers and the manuscript itself. Despite the apparent unfinished nature of

⁹² Quoted in: Bahr, *Fragments and Assemblages*, 41.

⁹³ *Horn Childe & Maiden Rimnild*, f.323^v. Thanks to Heidi Brayman for her insight on this marginal note.

The Canterbury Tales, Chaucer's work does not suffer for it and, as Bahr notes, has ultimately been stabilized by its readers.

Both *The Canterbury Tales* and the Auchinleck romances resist the notion of deficiency in relation to their incompleteness. Chaucer's own critique of medieval knighthood contrasts sharply with Auchinleck's uncritical celebration of it, but both demonstrate the continued prevalence and persistence of disassemblage as an essential mode of understanding medieval chivalric signification. Assuming the deficiency of a manuscript based simply on the ways in which it has been damaged or disassembled ignores the possibility of reading its lacunae as a legible absence, a fragmentation that speaks just as loudly if not moreso than an untouched text. Auchinleck is arguably aware of and engaged with the planned-fragmentation of material and textual bodies through a system of stable redundancy in much the same way that the medieval armored body accepts its own fragmentation, not as an unfortunate eventuality but as necessary and vital to the chivalric institution.

One final example of inherent fragmentation in chivalric discourse appears in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, when Troilus returns from battle:

His helm tohewen was in twenty places,
That by a tyssew heng his bak byhynde;
His shield todashed was with swerdes and maces,
In which men might many an arwe fynde
That thirled hadde horn and nerf and rynde.⁹⁴

[His helm was hewed in twenty places

⁹⁴ Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Riverside Chaucer* 3rd ed. Larry D. Benson ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 2.638-42.

So that by a tissue it hung behind his bak;
His shield had been dashed with swords and maces,

And in it men might many an arrow find
That had pierced horn and sinew and hide]

Combat has reduced Troilus' armor to fragments that fall about him in such a severe state of disassemblage that only a "tyssew" seems to be holding him together. Despite this tattered state Troilus is never more knightly, since just a few lines prior the narrator observes "So lik a man of armes and a knight / He was to seen, fulfilled of heigh prowess" [So like a man of arms and a knight / He seemed, filled with high prowess.]⁹⁵ In fact, it is Troilus' post-combat disassembly as opposed to his pre-combat pristineness that ignites Criseyde's love. As Criseyde reflects upon the image of the battle-worn Troilus: "most hire favour was, for his distresse / Was al for hire, and thought it was a routhe / To sleen swich oon, if that he mente trouthe" [her favor, mostly, was because of his injuries. / For she thought it was a pity / To slay one such as him if his intentions were honorable].⁹⁶ Having never spoken to Troilus or seen his performance in combat, Criseyde still reads honor and nobility into his torn and broken armor. The damaged materials of chivalry are witness enough to Troilus' abilities. Despite Chaucer's skepticism about medieval knighthood in the *Tale of Thopas* and elsewhere, he still demonstrates an acute understanding of the central role disassemblage plays in medieval armorial discourses. If Chaucer actually *had* read Auchinleck, as some scholars have

⁹⁵ Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 2.631-2.

⁹⁶ Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 2.659-665.

supposed, it might not be far-fetched to suggest that his understanding of Troilus echoes Heraud's insistence on the stability of his chivalric identity when, despite the extensive carving performed upon his hauberk, he exclaims adamantly that "Pei min armes apeired be, / Me bodi naþ no wounde" [though my arms damaged be / my body hath no wound.]⁹⁷ The stereotypical image of the medieval chivalric subject is that of the knight in shining armor, but this is only half of the story; the armor of the authentic medieval knight is both shining and *carven*, two states of assemblage and disassemblage that necessarily correspond. While Erasmus' text mentioned at the beginning of this chapter figures the material book as an essential component of chivalric equipment, the pristineness of the British Library's Middle English Manuscript of Erasmus' book more easily compares to the shining armor we often see in museum displays. Most of this armor was never used on the battlefield, being made primarily for show or parade purposes.⁹⁸ The Auchinleck Manuscript, on the other hand, actively participates, both textually and materially, in the assemblage and disassemblage of medieval English armorial discourse.

⁹⁷ *Reinbroun*, 721-9.

⁹⁸ Carolyn Springer notes that most museum armor was either designed for parade purposes and thus not made to be functional on a battlefield or has been assembled from numerous incomplete sets in order to represent a theoretical whole: *Armour and Masculinity in the Italian Renaissance*, (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 4-6.

Chapter 4

“[N]one armour myghte holde hym”: the “Brastyng” of Armorial Discourse in Malory’s

*Le Morte Darthur*¹

In a 2012 presentation on Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* at the International Congress on Medieval Studies John Marino defined the word “brastyng” as: “violent activity, a sudden bursting or shattering.”² Marino’s definition refers specifically to the breaking asunder of chivalric bodies in Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur*, perhaps the single most popular and arguably most exhaustive medieval compendium of Arthurian lore.³ As Marino pointed out, Malory’s knights have a habit of “brastyng” on a regular basis, most often as a result of chivalric combat. When, for example, Sir Bagdemagus rides against a marauding white knight, he:

dressid his spere ageynst hym and brake hit upon the whyte knyght but the other stroke hym soo hard that he *braste the mayles* and sheef hym thorou the ryght sholder for the shelde coverd hym not as at that tyme & soo he bare hym from his hors.

¹ Scholars and publishers are remarkably inconsistent with spelling, punctuating, and capitalizing the title of Malory’s book. Throughout this chapter I adhere to the title William Caxton uses in his colophon to the 1485 edition: “Thus endeth thys noble and joyous book entituled le morte Darthur”: Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur* (London: William Caxton, 1485. STC 801), EE7^r. I make the simple exception of capitalizing “Morte.”

² John B. Marino, “Brastyng” (Paper presented at the International Congress on Medieval Studies. Kalamazoo, MI, 10 May 2012).

³ Dorsey Armstrong calls Malory’s text “the most comprehensive and sustained medieval treatment of the Arthurian legend by a single author”: *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2003), 2.

[dressed his spear against him and broke it upon the white knight but the other stroke him so hard that he burst the mail and pierced him through the right shoulder for the shield covered him not at that time and so he bore him from his horse.]⁴

More often than not, the brastyng in Malory refers to the material results of chivalric combat. In other words, armor "brastes." This is not to say that armor has never "brasted" before. After all, Auchinleck's knights is regularly slice each other's hauberks and Chrétien's knight's have a tendency to burst the straps and links of their equipment. Despite this damage, however, armor remains an effective means of protection in battle. In many cases the damage done to armor is an indicator of the damage *not* being done to the body beneath it. This is not the case for Malory, whose knights tend to cut and thrust through their opponents' armor almost as if it was not there. The latest and perhaps most unwieldy chivalric texts discussed here, Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* is consistently preoccupied with a celebration of the heroic and civic virtues of medieval knighthood but its treatment of armor as cumbersome and ineffective undermines established traditions of romance armorial discourses. Furthermore, many readers allured by the idealized unity of the Arthurian Round Table have overlooked *Le Morte Darthur*'s departure from genre conventions to frame Malory's book as a representation of cultural and textual wholeness.

Recent criticism of Malory demonstrates an intertwining of conversations on chivalry, gender, violence, and the anxiety of fractured identities. Kathleen Coyne

⁴ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, N7^v. Emphasis mine. All translations of Malory are mine.

Kelly's article "Malory's Body Chivalric" opens one of the most valuable and influential conversations on representations of chivalric masculinity in *Le Morte Darthur*.⁵

Challenging the critical tendency to classify damaged masculinity as femininity, Kelly frames Malory's masculine chivalric body as an inherently unstable construct that must be challenged before it can reassert its potency. Laurie Finke and Martin Shichtman recognize violence as the primary currency of chivalric exchange in Arthurian romance, often to the detriment of its female characters.⁶ Chivalric violence, they argue, is simultaneously an agent of order and a cause of chaos. Dorsey Armstrong corroborates Finke and Shichtman's reading, citing *Le Morte Darthur*'s chivalric institutions as both the source of communal power and its eventual downfall.⁷ More recently scholars like K.S. Whetter, Christoph Houswitschka, and Raluca L. Radulescu have continued this discussion, focusing more specifically on the contradictory nature of chivalric violence. Whetter examines this irony in *Le Morte Darthur*'s depiction of warfare, concluding that Malory is simultaneously invested in both the glorifying and destructive nature of warfare.⁸ Houswitschka is more positivistic about the role of chivalric masculinity, especially that of Lancelot. In understanding the narrative effects of social downfall, Houswitschka understands chivalric masculinity as an organizing social force created in

⁵ Kathleen Coyne Kelly, "Malory's Body Chivalric" (*Arthuriana* 6.4, 1996), 52-71.

⁶ Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, "No Pain, No Gain: Violence as Symbolic Capital in Malory's *Morte Darthur*" (*Arthuriana* 8.2: 1998), 115-134.

⁷ Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur*.

⁸ K. S. Whetter, "Warfare and Combat in *Le Morte Darthur*" in *Writing War: Medieval Literary Responses to Warfare*, Corinne Saunders, Françoise Le Saux, and Neil Thomas eds. (Brewer, 2004), 169-186.

“times of social disintegration,” but ultimately un-beholden to the disintegration caused by the violence it embodies.⁹ Radulescu is more critical of chivalric violence, understanding its excess as the primary cause for the Round Table’s disintegration.¹⁰ In this, Radulescu understands *Le Morte Darthur* as a negative example for social responsibility. These studies all recognize an inherent entropy in Malory’s chivalric masculinity. The violent performances of individual knights are the source of Arthurian power, the mechanism of social order, and the source of heroic reputation. At the same time, however, chivalric violence is inherently destructive to social and physical bodies. In this, the scholarship is distinctly aware of the political and corporeal instabilities of romance chivalry, the institution Malory appears so eager to celebrate. Despite extensive coverage of Malory’s depiction of violent bodies, scholars have yet to address the role of armor and chivalric materiality within Malory’s entropic system.

As has been my method in previous chapters, understanding armor and chivalric materiality must begin with an assessment of corporeal assemblage. Malory’s treatment of Arthuriana is punctuated by an anxiety over corporeal, political, and textual wholeness. Citing Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque, Kelly notes of the perpetually fragmenting bodies in the *Morte Darthur* that “[s]uch a body is unfinished, in

⁹ Christoph Houswitschka, “Masculinity in Thoms Malory’s *Morte Darthur*” in *Configuring Masculinity in Theory and Literary Practice*, Stefan Horlacher ed. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill-Rodopi, 2015), 93.

¹⁰ Raluca L. Radulescu, “‘Oute of Mesure’: Violence and Knighthood in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*” in *Re-Viewing Le Morte Darthur: Texts and Contexts, Characters and Themes*, K.S. Whetter, Racula L. Radelescu, and P.J.C. Field eds. (Woodbridge, UK: Brewer, 2006), 119-131.

process, subject to change—in other words, precisely the opposite of what the body chivalric, both communal and individual, is supposed to be.”¹¹ Kelly refers not simply to the corporeal body but the communal chivalric body as well since both seem to exist in a precarious state of instability and potential disintegration. King Arthur himself exhibits an awareness of this dubious wholeness after the entirety of the Round Table takes up the Grail Quest. Knowing that the quest heralds the disintegration of the body chivalric, Arthur declares,

neuer shalle I see yow ageyne *hole to gyders*, therfor I wille see yow alle *hole to gyders* in the medowe of Camelot to Iuste and to torneye, that after your dethe men maye speke of hit that suche good knyghtes were *holy to gyders* suche a day.

[never shall I see you again whole together, therefore I will see you all whole together in the meadow of Camelot to joust and to tourney, that after your death men may speak of it that such good knights were whole together such a day.]¹²

Arthur’s anxiety stems from his perception of communal wholeness and he repeats this need to maintain his knights “hole togyders” three times in the passage. Commenting on this passage, Kelly asserts that “Arthur’s lament emphasizes the importance of communal integrity and, through its very excess of repetition, reveals its fragility. For the Grail Quest will indeed break apart the body chivalric, irrecoverably fragmenting it—let alone castrating, mutilating, dismembering, dislocating, eviscerating, devouring, and bursting it open.”¹³ Kelly describes Arthur’s anticipation of communal brastyng in profoundly

¹¹ Kelly, “Malory’s Body Chivalric,” 59.

¹² Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, H4^v-H5^f. Emphasis mine.

¹³ Kelly, “Malory’s Body Chivalric,” 61.

corporeal terms, terms that reflect the close connection between Malory's conception of civic wholeness and the tendency for his chivalric bodies to disaggregate. This is not the perpetually becoming body J. J. Cohen sees in Chrétien's *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* but one threatening permanent un-becoming.¹⁴

In the larger scheme of this dissertation Malory's book represents a culmination of armorial discourses in a number of ways. First and foremost, Malory's text depicts a wide range of Arthurian knights with long reputations in the romance traditions that postdate the works of Chrétien de Troyes. Malory's recycling of chivalric material inherently involves the appropriation of the genre's foundational elements, especially armorial discourses. Secondly, Malory's project was not so much a work of original genius so much as one of adaptation. He constructed his book from a large corpus of popular Arthurian texts in order to create what many scholars have come to recognize as a "whole book," that is, a near-complete compendium of Arthurian material. In drawing upon texts from the works of *Chrétien de Troyes* to the anonymous *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, Malory attempted to absorb, synthesize, and distill the entire corpus of Arthurian romances for which armorial discourses are integral. As has been suggested in the preceding chapter, books and suits of armor both represent forms of chivalric assemblage. Malory's book is certainly one such assemblage, with the main difference between *Le Morte Darthur* and a miscellaneous book like Auchinleck being the clear presence of a

¹⁴ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "The Inhuman Circuit," *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, Gail Weiss and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen eds. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 167.

single authorial genius. Lastly, it must be noted that Malory composed and published his grand celebration of medieval knighthood during a time when the chivalric institution was in sharp decline. In his reliance upon established narratives, Malory creates an assemblage of post-functional armorial discourses that distance the author from contemporary chivalric realities and further represent the unsustainability of chivalric assemblage as a motif for understanding knighthood. In effect, Malory exemplifies the “brastyng” point of armorial discourses in medieval chivalric romance.

Late-medieval Warfare and Malory’s Response to Tradition

Plate armor had already reached its technological zenith when Malory wrote *Le Morte Darthur*, though the reader might not immediately notice this. While armor is ever-present throughout *Le Morte Darthur*, just as it is for many of Malory’s predecessors in the romance genre, in contrast to Chrétien de Troyes and the Gawain poet, Malory’s armor is significantly lacking in hard detail. One of the few indicators of Malory’s understanding of armorial technology comes during Lancelot’s combat with Meleagant during an episode that vaguely reflects Chrétien’s *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*. After driving Meleagant to the ground and being instructed by the Queen to hold no quarter, Lancelot offers to even the odds between himself and his opponent, saying "I shall unarme my hede & my lyfte quarter of my body all that may be unarmed & lete bynde my lyfte hand behynde me, soo that it shalle not helpe me, and ryghte so I shall do bataille with yow" [I shall disarm my head and my left quarter of my body; all that may be unarmed. And bind my left hand behind me, so that it shall not help me. In

this way I shall do battle with you.]¹⁵ Lancelot immediately disarms in this exact way, rendering himself a vertically-bifurcated knight: his left side lacks armor and shield while his right remains armed. This moment offers a small glimpse of the armor that Malory seems reluctant to describe. A partial disarming act like this could only be performed by a knight wearing plate armor. For Chrétien's mail-clad knights, armor is either on or off; the hauberk is a whole garment and is only ever reduced to smaller pieces during combat. However, with the chivalric inventory in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the components of later armorial technology were built and attached as independent pieces. In order to disarm one side of his body, Lancelot would likely need to remove the following components from top to bottom: a pauldron (shoulder), a vambrace (upper-arm), a couter (elbow), possibly a bracer (wrist), a gauntlet (hand), a cuisse (thigh), a poleyn (knee), a greave (shin), and a sabaton (foot). The only specific detail Malory offers of this disassembly is the removal of Lancelot's helmet, and even then the helmet itself is only mentioned indirectly: "sire Launcelot shewed him openly his bare hede and the bare lyfte syde" [Sir Lancelot showed him openly his bare head and the bare left side.]¹⁶ *Le Morte Darthur* never offers an explicit inventory of chivalric equipment but we can glean from this scene that Malory's image of knighthood would have been arguably similar to the knight which appears in Caxton's printing of Jacobus de Cessolus' *Chesse* (see Figure 8). Malory's knights are thus fully encased in stiff plate, the most

¹⁵ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, aa1^r. This scene also includes one of only two uses of the word "dysarmed" in the entirety of *Le Morte Darthur*.

¹⁶ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, aa1^v.

protection that late-medieval metallurgy could offer. And yet the rate at which these suits of armor are destroyed in *Le Morte Darthur* suggests another narrative.

Malory's book was written and published when the armored knight, rather than a representation of strength and effectiveness was becoming a symbol of redundancy on the late medieval battlefield. The Wars of the Roses saw a significant change in military tactics and equipment that would ultimately make the armored knight obsolete. This process had already begun during the Hundred Years' War when the English longbow became a significant threat to armored warriors; the longbow and the later crossbow could easily pierce mail and plate armor was a direct response to the use of these weapons.¹⁷ Ranged warfare represented a threat to chivalry not only because of the bow's ability to subvert armor that was otherwise effective in hand-to-hand combat but also because such weapons could be wielded by common soldiers. Clifford J. Rogers describes the shift caused by this change in weaponry as a kind of "technological determinism" that, in turn, caused a shift in the personnel of warfare.¹⁸ This same technological determinism continued with the development of gunpowder weapons. In much the same way that the English longbow turned the tide at the Battle of Agincourt, guns and gunpowder began to change the landscape of the English battlefield from as

¹⁷ John Clements, *Medieval Swordsmanship: Illustrated Methods and Techniques* (Boulder, CO: Paladin Press, 1998), 52.

¹⁸ Clifford J. Rogers, "The Development of the Longbow in Late Medieval England and 'Technological Determinism'" (*Journal of Medieval History* 37.3: 2011), 341.

early as the mid-fourteenth century.¹⁹ Weapons like these served to democratize warfare, making the operator of a canon or bombard (an early handheld firearm) just as deadly as the wielder of sword and lance; death was democratized in much the same way, a knight being just as vulnerable to a cannonball as an unarmored foot soldier.²⁰ Such ammunition could easily penetrate plate armor, making the armored knight, formerly a practical representation of martial prowess and imperviousness, a symbol of redundancy. Most readers agree that *Le Morte Darthur* offers a nostalgically sympathetic view of medieval chivalric ideals that were already in sharp decline in the late fifteenth century. In this sense, one might expect Malory to draw upon the armorial imagery of the past in order to revive a dying ideal. We see this in *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*, a text published fifteen years after *Le Morte Darthur* but that represents fourteenth-century armorial technology.²¹ Instead Malory's treatment of armor, rather than reify its martial and symbolic potency, actually highlights armor's ineffectiveness in much the same way that a cannon could.

¹⁹ Kelly DeVries and Robert Douglas Smith, *Medieval Military Technology* (Tonawanda, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 138.

²⁰ DeVries and Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*, 156.

²¹ The composition date for *Gologras* is a matter of debate. I maintain an earlier date based on its representation of coat-plate armor, the same kind of armor depicted in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written in the fourteenth century. Conversely, scholars like Randy P. Schiff and Kristin Boviard-Abbo both argue for a fifteenth-century composition: Randy P. Schiff, *Revivalist Fantasy: Alliterative Verse and Nationalist Literary History* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2011); Kristin Boviard-Abbo, "'Reirdit on ane riche roche beside ane riveir': Martial Landscape and James IV of Scotland in The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawane" (*Neophilologus* 98: 2014), 675-688.

Malory's Immaterial Armor

Le Morte Darthur represent a significant departure from the armorial discourses discussed in the preceding chapters. My assessment considers three distinct categories of armorial engagement, the first being the relative lack of detail in dis/arming acts.

Malory's knights dis/arm just as much as Chrétien's knights do but beyond calling attention to the fact that a dis/arming act has occurred, Malory offers minimal detail for the material components associated with these acts.²² The second category addresses the ways in which Malory dissociates armor from chivalric performance. The knights in *Le Morte Darthur* are often capable of chivalric heroism independently of their armor and are even regularly encumbered by its presence. The third and most important category examines the surprising ways in which armor in *Le Morte Darthur* seems completely incapable of performing the function for which it was designed. Many of the strokes delivered by swords and lances pass directly through Malory's chivalric bodies with little to no resistance from hauberk, plate, or helm as if they had not been wearing armor at all.

As discussed in Chapter 2, in both Chrétien's *Erec et Enide* and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, a detailed arming act that inventories armorial components helps to indicate the metallurgical quality and economic value of a given suit of armor.

Whereas Chrétien was careful to rotate his knights regularly into and out of their armor,

²² It should be noted that while Chrétien pays careful attention to the structural function of oscillation between armed/disarmed states, for Malory the mention of dis/arming acts is much more incidental.

Malory generally assumes the presence of armor during combat and similarly neglects to narrate its removal when his knights enter domestic spaces or leave the battlefield. For example, when Sir Gawain sustains injuries during Arthur's siege of Lancelot's castle in *Le Morte Darthur's* final episode "syr Gauwayn was borne in to kyng arthurs pauyllyon & leches were brought to hym & serched and salued with softe oynementes" [Sir Gawain was carried into King Arthur's pavilion and doctors were brought to him who inspected and salved his wounds with soft ointments.]²³ Treating Gawain's wounds would require the removal of armor, but Malory never mentions this part of the healing process.

As soon as Gawain is healed enough to fight again, "he armyd hym at al poyntes & sterte vpon a courser and gate a spere in his hande" [he armed himself at all points and started upon a courser and took a spear with his hand.]²⁴ This brief arming act demonstrates the usual extent of Malory's armorial detail; most arming acts throughout *le Morte D'Arthur* simply indicate that a knight "armed him" or "armed at al poyntes" with minimal description of armorial components. This description does more than simply indicating that the knight set forth; Malory is careful enough to regularly remind the reader that arming must occur in order for the knight to be prepared to perform. In this sense "al poyntes" could serve as a shorthand for the larger assemblage with which a chivalric audience would already be familiar. If this is the case, however, then the abbreviation suffers for lack of a clear initial definition. In the case of *Sir Gawain and the*

²³ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, dd1^v.

²⁴ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, dd2^r.

Green Knight, the reader knows exactly what Gawain removes upon his arrival to and departure from Hautdesert since his initial departure from Camelot is punctuated by a highly detailed arming act. Though Malory may on occasion accompany include a horse, shield, and spear in an “al poyntes” arming act, we are left to imagine the inventory extrapolated above with regard to Lancelot’s encounter with Meleagant. Armor is present, but only as an obligatory element; it still lacks presence.²⁵

Malory further compounds the problem of armor’s intangibility by dissociating chivalric performance from armor. The traditions of armorial discourse crafted by Malory’s predecessors establish a firm connection between armor and chivalric identity; in order to perform to his fullest, the chivalric subject must be fully encased in his armor. Many of Malory’s knights seem aware of this tradition but their performance undermines it. In some cases, knights are simply capable of chivalric performance without their armor.

Multiple examples of armorial dissociation can be found in Malory’s retelling of Lancelot's conflict with Meleagant, offering a stark contrast to the armorial discourses in Chrétien de Troyes *Le Chevalier de la Charrette*.²⁶ While Queen Guinevere is riding in

²⁵ In an offhanded comment comparing *Le Morte Darthur* (unfavorably) with *Sir Gawain*, Derek Brewer observes that “Malory will have no luck with [the arming topos]”: Brewer, Derek Brewer, “Armour II: The Arming Topos as Literature” (*A Companion to the Gawain-Poet*, Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson eds. Cambridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1997), 179.

²⁶ P.J.C. Field argues that Malory would have read Chrétien’s work but the major sources for his Lancelot episodes would have been the Old French *Lancelot-Grail Cycle*, the Old French *Perlesvaus*, and the Middle English *Ywain and Gawain: Malory: Texts and Sources* (Suffolk, UK: D.S. Brewer, 1998), 245.

the countryside she and her (unarmed) attendant knights are set upon by Meleagant's forces and abducted. Protecting the Queen despite his lack of armor, "Pelleas gaf suche buffets there that none armour myghte holde hym" [Pelleas gave such buffets there that no armor might hold him.]²⁷ In her modernization of the Winchester Manuscript, Dorsey Armstrong presents this line as: "Sir Pelleas delivered such blows that there was no armor that could resist him."²⁸ Armstrong's reading of this line indicates the weakness of an opponent's armor in the face of Pelleas strength. Indeed, the armor of Pelleas' opponents hardly offers any resistance nor does Pelleas himself seem to suffer much for a lack of his own accoutrement. Malory's original wording suggests a further dissociation between the knight and his armor since no armor "myghte holde" him. The *Middle English Dictionary* lists a number of definitions for the verb "holden" that emphasize a sense of containment, restraining, enclosure, or ownership; definition thirteen indicates a sense of protection but this is clearly not the most common usage of the verb.²⁹ Per Armstrong's reading, the armor being referred to here could be that of Pelleas' opponents, which would emphasize both Pelleas' strength and the inefficacy of the opponent's armor. On the other hand, the armor being referred to could be Pelleas' absent armor, which would emphasize the

²⁷ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, Z3^r.

²⁸ Thomas Malory, *Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur: A New Modern Translation Based on the Winchester Manuscript*, Dorsey Armstrong ed. (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2009), 573. Caxton's edition corresponds almost exactly to the Winchester Manuscript, where this line appears as follows: "Pelleas gaff such buffetis there that none armure myght holde hym" British Library Additional Manuscript 59678, <<http://www.maloryproject.com/>>: F 437^r.

²⁹ "holden," v.1, *Middle English Dictionary* (University of Michigan, 24 April 2013).

ability of Pelleas body to perform independently of or even beyond the limits prescribed by armor.

Immediately prior to Pelleas' unarmored performance above, the Queen's Knight's collectively condemn Meleagant's attack, saying "ye ar aboute to Ieoparde your worshyp to dishonor, and also ye cast to Ieoparde oure persons, how be it we ben vnarmed, ye haue vs at a grete auayle" [You are about to jeopardize your reputation to the point of dishonor, and also you are about to jeopardize ourselves, since we be unarmed. You have us at great disadvantage.]³⁰ The knights cast themselves as precariously vulnerable without their armor. This complaint would seem to foreshadow some degree of casualty or injury, but as Pelleas' unarmed performance above shows, the concern proves unfounded. Despite the knights' insistence upon armor as a chivalric necessity their performance undermines the discourse of assemblage. Malory figures armor as incapable of protecting, containing, or channeling chivalric bodies and thus breaks with the conventional understanding of armor as an essential indicator of chivalric wholeness and the ability to perform. Pelleas does not perform "marvelous deeds of arms" (one of Malory's favorite phrases) *because* of his armor but perhaps because he *lacks* it.

A similar moment of unarmored performance occurs when Lancelot is caught in Queen Guinevere's chambers by Mordred and Agravain. Painfully aware of his unarmored state, Lancelot begs of Guinevere "is there here ony armour within your

³⁰ Malory, STC 801, Z2^v.

chambre that I myght couer my poure body with al, And yf there be ony gyue hit me, and I shalle soone stynte their malyce by the grace of god” [Is there any armor here within your chamber with which I might cover my poor body? And if there is any, give it to me and I shall soon stay their malice by the grace of God.]³¹ Lancelot demonstrates a similar anxiety over armor as a necessary component of chivalric performance. He feels that “stynt[ing] their malice” is only possible if he is armed. He even voices a similarly pessimistic lament over the outcome of unarmored combat, exclaiming “Allas [...] in alle my lyf thus was I neuer bestadde that I shold be thus shamefully slayne for lack of myn armour” [Alas...I have never been thus bested in all my life, that I should be thus shamefully slain because I lack my armor.]³² After voicing this lament Lancelot immediately slays Colgreuance and takes his armor before fighting his way through Agravain, Mordred, and his other would-be assailants. Lancelot’s complaint operates similarly to the knight’s indictment of Meleagant above. Despite the claim of armorial disadvantage and the grisly outcome this lack seems likely to cause, Lancelot’s unarmored body is perfectly capable of chivalric violence. In this, Malory appears to contradict his own knights’ perceptions of armorial assemblage. Whereas Chrétien’s Lancelot is regularly wounded while disarmed, prompting the need for re-arming, Malory’s knights demonstrate the same anxiety but experience no such penalty. This disconnect leaves us to wonder what happens when Malory’s knights are actually armed.

³¹ Malory, STC 801, aa8^r.

³² Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, aa8^r.

When riding in pursuit of Meleagant, Lancelot is beset by a group of archers whose attacks effectively disembowel Lancelot's horse.³³ Unable to ride, Lancelot must walk while fully armed, which makes him feel "sowre combred of his armour, his shelde and his spere and alle that honged unto hym" [terribly encumbered by his armor, his shield, his spear and all that hung onto him.]³⁴ As mentioned above, armorial inventories often serve the purpose of emphasizing the quality of the equipment but Malory almost never describes an arming act in detail. In this case, however, Lancelot's equipment is inventoried not for the sake of positive description but to emphasize how heavy and immobile a knight could feel when fully-equipped except for a horse. Lancelot's equipment does not compliment or enhance his chivalric prowess. Instead, his armor "honged" on and "combred" him, as if their distributed weight actually presented a challenge to the movement and articulation of each individual limb.

This encumbrance could even be behind Lancelot's eager willingness to partially disarm when fighting Meleagant, discussed previously. As Lancelot disarms "many a lady & knygz̄t merveylled that sir launcelot wold jeopardye hym self in such wyse" [many a lady and knight marveled that Sir Lancelot would jeopardize himself in this way.]³⁵ This concern echoes that of the Queen's knights and Lancelot, all of whom seem sure that any level of disarmament poses an extreme hazard to a fighting knight. In

³³ The horse does not die right away but, accompanying cart-riding Lancelot, all the while "he trade his guttes and his paunche under his feet" [he tread his guts and his stomach under his feet] (Z4^v).

³⁴ Malory, STC 801, Z4^r.

³⁵ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, aa1^{r-v}.

actuality, this concern amounts to nearly nothing when, resuming the battle "with grete force syr launcelot smote [Meleagant] on the helmet suche a buffet that the stroke herued the hede in two partyes" [with great force, Sir Lancelot smote Meleagant on the helmet such a buffet that the stroke halved the head in two parts.]³⁶ Despite the dramatic significance placed on Lancelot's disarming, the second part of this fight consists of a single sword blow. Lancelot's dramatic disarming act seems to promise a climactic spectacle but entirely fails to follow through on its symbolic implications. In fact, the apparent uselessness of Meleagant's helmet calls into question whether Lancelot's partial disarming has fundamentally changed anything about him and additionally undermines the equipage of the fully-armed knight.

Malory regularly disregards the conventions of armorial discourse in two ways: on one hand, when armor is present, it is rarely capable of serving the function for which it was designed. Meleagant's halved-head is only one of many such carvings scattered throughout the *Morte's* myriad chivalric battlefields. On the other hand, in moments when armor *should* exert its presence by resisting the blow of a sword or lance, Malory simply disregards its existence and allows these weapons to pass through chivalric bodies with almost no resistance whatsoever. These moments appear designed to emphasize the remarkable strength of the combatants' "buffets" but the lack of armorial detail gives the reader no clear indication of armor's ability to resist such blows. *Le Morte Darthur's* armor simply lacks materiality.

³⁶ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, aa1^v.

A prime example of armor's non-presence appears in the *Morte Darthur's* penultimate combat between Mordred and Arthur, during which both combatants seem perfectly capable of dismembering the other with little to no help from their armor. When father and son come together in the final combat of Malory's book:

king Arthur smote syr Mordred under the shelde wyth a foyne of his spere thoroughoute the body more than a fathom. And whan syr Mordred felt that he had hys dethe wounde, he thurst hym self with the myght that he had up to the bur of kyng Arthures spere. And right so he smote his fader Arthur wyth his swerde holden in bothe his handes on the syde of the heed that the swerde percyd the helmet and the brayne panne, and therewithall syr Mordred fyl starke deed on the erthe. And the nobyl Arthur fyl in a swoune to the erthe, and there he swouned ofte tymes.

[King Arthur smote Sir Mordred under the shield with the point of his spear and through the body more than a fathom. And when Sir Mordred felt that he had his death wound, he thrust himself with all his might up to the burr of King Arthur's spear. Then he smote his father, Arthur on the side of the head with his sword held in both his hands so that the sword pierced the helmet and the brain-pan. Then Sir Mordred fell stark-dead on the ground and the noble Arthur fell in a swoon to the ground; there he swooned many times.]³⁷

Malory mentions Mordred's shield in passing but not as an effective piece of protection. Arthur aims beneath it and pierces Mordred's body where perhaps a breastplate or even a hauberk should be but isn't. In fact, Mordred's soft body offers so little resistance that the spear passes all the way through and even allows him to slide further down its shaft for a clearer shot at Arthur. If any chivalric subject in the entirety of the *Morte Darthur* ought to wear armor of the highest-quality it is Arthur himself, but this blow is unhindered by the King's equipment, piercing the helmet and skull as easily as Pelleas cleaves the

³⁷ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, dd7^r.

marauding knights' or Lancelot Meleagant's. Again, this depiction of chivalric combat might be designed to suggest the near-divine strength of the combatants but without a comparative qualifier like "*with such strength that* the sword pierced the helmet and the brain-pan" Malory's stark literalism deemphasizes the strength of both the knights and their armor. What we get instead is a collection of chivalric bodies in a near-perpetual process of "brastyng."

In its portrayal of the ballistics of combat *Le Morte Darthur* shares a great deal in common with *The Knightly Tale of Gologras and Gawain*. As I observe in Chapter 2, the knightly prowess and narrative progress of combat in *Gologras* is measured through the force of knightly blows upon armor. As Marino has indicated above, the "brastyng" emphasized by Malory similarly calls attention the power with which his knights strike each other. However, whereas *Gologras* offers the potential for parallel readings of armorial production and destruction, Malory's dismissal of armorial materiality instead emphasizes the ease with which the chivalric subject is destroyed. Malory's knights often claim victory after a sword stroke descends through a helmet and into the opponent's "brain-pan" or when a lance is thrust entirely through an opponent's body with only minimal resistance from the pierced knight's armor. We see examples of this when:

with a myghty stroke [Sir Tristram] smote syr Marhaus vpon the helme suche a buffet that hit went thorou his helme and thorou the coyfe of stele and thorou the brayn pan and the swerd stak soo fast in the helme and in his brayn pan that sir Trystram pulled thryes at his swerd or euer he myght pulle it out from his hede.

[with a mighty stroke, Sir Tristram smote Sir Marhaus upon the helm such a blow that it went through his helm, through the coif of steel, through the skull. The sword stuck so fast in the helm and in the skull that, though Sir

Tristram pulled thrice at his sword, he could never pull it out from Sir Marhaus' head.]³⁸

A similar stroke occurs when, “Balyn hyt [Sir Lanceor] thourgh the sheld and the hauberk perysshed & so percyd thurgh his body and the hors crophe” [Balin hit Sir Lanceor through the shield and the hauberk perished so that Balyn pierced through Lanceor's body and the horse's rump.]³⁹ In neither case is armor invisible but in both cases it does little to protect the body beneath it. Even the chivalric body itself seems easily sliced or penetrated. These passages present two interpretive avenues. On one hand, the ease with which armor is penetrated emphasizes the strength of the attacker's stroke. In this case, armor is understood as generally effective and we would instead marvel at just how much strength it would take to deliver the kind of sword blow capable of bisecting a helm and the skull within. On the other hand, the ease with which armor is penetrated reveals the stark inability of armor to deal with standard chivalric combat. Malory's stark literalism leaves both of these interpretive avenues open. He rarely qualifies these descriptions of combat by indicating that, for example, that Tristram's blow was so strong that even a plate helmet could not withstand it or conversely that Lanceor's helmet was so weak that Tristram's blow easily carved it. Reading into Malory's remarkably consistent system for representing chivalric ballistics helps to address this ambiguity.

³⁸ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, q5^r.

³⁹ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, c8^v.

There are probably more combats per page in *Le Morte Darthur* than any other romance text, leading many to accuse Malory of repetitiveness. Indeed, phrases like “such a buffet” or “through the brain-pan” or “marvelous deeds of arms” appear with such frequency that a broader examination of this language reveals the full scope of *Le Morte Darthur*’s disengagement with chivalric materiality. Not including the rubric and preface, Caxton’s 1485 edition of *Le Morte Darthur* contains eight hundred twenty-six pages of text. Table 8 briefly inventories Malory’s vocabulary of combat. With over 2,000 total references to arms, armor, or deeds performed with them in eight hundred twenty-seven pages of text, Malory addresses the materials of chivalric identity roughly 2½ times per page.⁴⁰

Surprisingly few of the nouns included in this list refer to suits of armor or its components. In fact, Malory never refers to any of the individual components of a plate suit, preferring instead generalized terms like “armour” and “harneys.” Strangely, the “helme” appears more frequently than any other individual component, mostly when it is being struck by a sword (as in the cases of Meleagant and Marhaus above). The single most frequently-mentioned piece of armorial technology is the shield. In the larger discussion of armorial discourses shields present somewhat of a problem with regard to the inherent connectivity between armor and body. The shield is externalized, disconnected, but perhaps also further demonstrates Malory’s rejection of established

⁴⁰ The math here is somewhat arbitrary, but for the sake of accuracy I base them on STC 801, which is eight hundred sixty-one pages in length, minus the first thirty-four pages taken up by Caxton’s rubrics.

Table 8: An Inventory of Malory's Armorial Vocabulary⁴¹

| Term | Variations and Further Explanations | # of appearances |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Armes, n. | Often "dedes of armes" (79 times) or "man/men of armes" (54 times), only refers to limbs 34 times | 221 |
| Armour, n. | | 72 |
| Armed, v./adj. | "armed at al poyntes," "wel/al armed" | 193 |
| Brake, v. | Usually in reference to shields or spears | 86 |
| Brast, v. | "braste," "brastyng," usually in reference to spears, shields, armor, or blood bursting through of armor | 46 |
| Cleue, v. | "claf," "clef," almost always a killing blow | 15 |
| Dressid, v. | "dressyd," "adrese," usually used in reference to shields, swords, or spears (only rarely in reference to public speaking or clothing) | 135 |
| Harneis, n. | "Harneys," Mainly in reference to the whole chivalric accoutrement ("harnoyes" appears five times but only in Caxton's rubrics) | 84 |
| Hauberk, n. | "hawberk," "haberion" | 17 |
| Helme, n. | "helm" n., "helmet" n. | 220 |
| Mayle, n. | Coat of mail, "mayles" refers to its links | 8 |
| Shelde, n. | "sheld," "shylde," "schild" | 492 |
| Smote, v. | "smyte," Often "thorow the body," "on the helme," "to his horse's croup," or "to the erthe" and usually by "swerde" or "launce" | 577 |
| Stroke, v. | "stryke" v., used in much the same sense as "smote" | 236 |
| Unarmed, v. | Rarely as an adj., "disarmed" (v.) appears twice | 86 |
| | | 2,488 |

⁴¹ Counts based on word searches of the University of Michigan's digitization of H. Oskar Sommer's transcription of Caxton's edition: Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, H. Oskar Sommer ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Humanities Text Initiative, 1997), <<http://name.umdl.umich.edu/MaloryWks2>>. I have omitted Caxton's rubrics from these counts.

armorial discourses. The armorial object with the most material presence in *Le Morte Darthur* is one held, quite literally, at arms length.

Almost every combat in *Le Morte Darthur* follows a similar pattern of events. First the knights mount and joust, often resulting in their spears being “al to sheuered” upon impact with the opponent’s shield. Once the spears are broken and jousting is no longer possible they “voyd” their horses, “dresse” their shields “afore” them, and draw their swords. The melee often covers the field in gore as blood “brastes” from the combatants’ armor. Ultimately the loser is struck upon the helm, often cleaving his armor and flesh to the “brayne panne.” We see a prime example of this during Arthur’s first encounter with Pellinore in one of the earliest episodes in the book:

[Arthur] toke his hors & dressid his shyld & toke a spere & they met so hard either in others sheldes that al to sheuered their sperys, [...] But the other knyghte hyt hym so hard in myddes of the shelde, that horse & man felle to the erthe, and ther with Arthur was egre & pulled oute his swerd, [...] and dressid his sheld toward hym with his swerd drawen, whan the knyght sawe that, [...] he alyght & dressid his sheld vnto Arthur & ther begā a strong bataille with many grete strokes, & soo hewe with her swerdes that the cantels flewe in the feldes, and moche blood they bledde bothe, that al the place there as they faught was ouer bledde with blood.

[Arthur mounted his horse and took up his shield and a spear and they struck so hard upon each others’ shields that their spears were shattered. But the other knight hit Arthur so hard in the midst of the shield that horse and man fell to the earth. Arthur then became ready and pulled out his sword and directed his shield toward Pellinore with his sword drawn. When the knight saw that he dismounted and directed his shield toward Arthur. There began a strong battle with many great strokes. The two struck so hard with their swords that metal shards flew in the field. They

both bled so much blood that the place where they fought was covered with blood.]⁴²

Countless battles throughout *Le Morte Darthur* follow a similar sequence. The curious thing about this oft-repeated sequence in *Le Morte Darthur* is the fact that the shield appears to offer the only functional protection for Malory's knights. This is not to say that Malory's shields are impervious. They are often dented or pierced, but the regularity with which a shield can "al tosheure" an opponent's spear contrasts with armor's general inability to do so. Armorial effectiveness is thus dismembered from the chivalric body and placed at a distance in a static piece of technology that cannot participate in chivalric assemblage in quite the same way that armor does.

Malory's depiction of easily-destroyed chivalric bodies may be due, in part, to the military realities of late fifteenth-century warfare. As DeVries and Smith have indicated, gunpowder played a significant role in warfare from the mid-fourteenth century onward.⁴³ The canons dotting the battlefields throughout the Hundred Years' War could easily have reduced an armored knight to his individual parts. If Malory himself participated in the military campaigns at Agincourt, Normandy, and Bayonne as Christina Hardyment suggests in her extensive (though somewhat speculative) biography, he certainly would have seen such war machines in action and would accordingly have been

⁴² Malory, STC 801, c2^v-c3^r. This passage has been heavily edited for the sake of brevity. Interestingly, one portion of the passage that I have not included here details the knights' agreement to joust twice more before switching to swords. Both times their spears shatter upon impact with their opponents' shields.

⁴³ Kelly DeVries and Robert Douglas Smith, *Medieval Military Technology*, 138.

aware of the fragility of the knight in the face of these new, explosive weapons of war.⁴⁴

Leo Braudy goes so far as to suggest the advent of gunpowder made Malory's celebration of the chivalric sword elegiac and his view of Camelot jaundiced in its contemporary context.⁴⁵ Braudy's observations match most reader's assumptions that *Le Morte Darthur* represents an attempt to piece together a version of medieval chivalry that was nearly defunct in Malory's historical moment. Setting aside historiography to read *Le Morte Darthur* in terms of armorial discourse reveals a text that actually exemplifies rather than rails against the narrative of chivalric fragmentation. Despite its traditional position as a medium for chivalric assemblage and cohesion, armor in *Le Morte Darthur* offers no help against the inevitability of fragmentation and instead consistently undermines established romance armorial discourses. Malory's chivalric body, as Kathleen Coyne Kelly argues, struggles with its own wholeness.

(Dis)assembling the "Hoole Boke"

Scholars have long recognized that Malory was writing in a time when the ideals of medieval chivalry were in their twilight. They have accordingly categorized *Le Morte*

⁴⁴ Christina Hardyment, *Malory: The Knight Who Became King Arthur's Chronicler* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005). Hardyment offers an extensive contextualization of Malory's life and times but any hard evidence that would convincingly historicize Malory's life remains tenuous.

⁴⁵ Leo Braudy, *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 118-119.

Darthur as an exhaustive attempt to prevent this decline and revivify chivalric ideals.

Dorsey Armstrong refers to *Le Morte Darthur* as “hymn to knighthood,” observing that:

although some might find Malory’s decision to engage in this activity as smacking of irony, I would argue that his decision to compose a story about a ‘golden age’ of chivalry while living in an age devoid, for all intents and purposes, of the loftier chivalric values, is no accident.⁴⁶

Malory’s response to this age of fractured chivalry was to reassemble these same ideals in a “hoole book” of Arthurian lore, what Armstrong elsewhere refers to as “the most comprehensive and sustained medieval treatment of the Arthurian legend by a single author.”⁴⁷ This description reveals Armstrong’s own preference for the Winchester Manuscript of Malory’s book, generally considered a closer representation of Malory’s original authorial vision.⁴⁸ For the first four hundred years of the book’s public life, however, readers relied upon William Caxton’s heavily-edited, rubricated, and rearranged version. As expressed in his introduction, Caxton expresses his own intentions for printing *Le Morte Darthur*:

to the entente that noble men may see and lerne the noble actes of chevalrye, the jentyl and vertuoues dedes that somme knyghtes used in the dayes [...] humbly bysechyng al noble lordes and ladyes wyth al other estates of what estate or degree they ben of, that see and rede in this sayd book and werke, that they take the good and honest actes in their remembraunce, and folowe the same.

⁴⁶ Armstrong, “Introduction,” *Morte Darthur: A New Modern Translation Based on the Winchester Manuscript*, viii.

⁴⁷ Dorsey Armstrong, *Gender and the Chivalric Community in Malory's Morte d'Arthur*, 2.

⁴⁸ Marco Nievergelt also argues for Winchester as an authorial text, noting Caxton’s tendency to remove instances of Malory’s authorial subjectivity: “Writing the ‘Hoole Book’ of King Arthur: The Inscription of the Textual Subject in Malory’s *Morte Darthur*” (*Modern Philology* 113.4: 2016), 460-481.

[with the intent that noble men may see and learn of the noble acts of chivalry, the gentle and virtuous deeds that some knights used in those days, humbly beseeching all noble lords and ladies of all other estates, no matter what estate or degree they be of, that those who see and read in this book and work take the good and honest acts into their memory and follow the same.]⁴⁹

Despite the discovery of the Winchester Manuscript in 1934, this conception of Malory's book as a social and moral exemplar has left an indelible impression on scholarship and readership. Considering the issue of brastyng armorial discourses in *Le Morte Darthur* addressed previously, the ways in which scholars and editors have treated the wholeness of Malory's book may actually *reflect* rather than interrogate anxieties over the integrity of the chivalric body.

Before assessing Malory's text in more detail it will be important to establish exactly what text will be the basis of my analysis. Since the rediscovery of the Winchester Manuscript scholars have debated its relative authority against the text's more widely-read and distributed 1485 printing by William Caxton.⁵⁰ Caxton's edition certainly has the longer critical history and deserves attention for its lasting impact on the literary and cultural landscape of England. After 1485 it was reprinted at least twice more in the same shop 1498 and 1529 by Wynkyn de Worde, the inheritor of Caxton's printing shop.⁵¹ *Le Morte Darthur* has remained in print ever since. However, since its

⁴⁹ William Caxton's preface to STC 801, a3^r.

⁵⁰ The Winchester MS is now catalogued as: British Library Additional Manuscript 59678 while Caxton's edition is categorized under the English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC) number 801.

⁵¹ STC 802 and STC 803, respectively.

rediscovery in the Winchester College Library by W.F. Oakeshott, the Winchester Manuscript has been understood as an earlier version of *Le Morte Darthur*.⁵² Some scholars have suggested that the Winchester MS was written by Malory himself. Others believe it to be a departure from Malory's original vision, perhaps even based on a common exemplar to Caxton's edition. It has even been convincingly demonstrated that the Winchester MS was present in Caxton's printing shop while he was preparing the 1485 edition.⁵³ The critical possibilities of the Winchester MS offered a significant departure from Malory scholarship, especially after Eugene Vinaver's influential suggestion in his 1947 edition entitled *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* (often referred to as *Works*) that Malory's text actually represents eight distinct narratives rather than the single, novelesque narrative represented in Caxton's edition. Scholars have generally rejected this theory as an artifact of Vinaver's zealous editing process.⁵⁴ However, the Winchester MS continues to represent an authorial version of Malory's work before Caxton rearranged, rubricated, and retitled it.

⁵² Oakeshott describes his discovery in "The Finding of the Manuscript," *Essays on Malory* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1963), 1-6.

⁵³ Lotte Hellinga, "The Malory Manuscript and Caxton" (*Aspects of Malory*, Toshiyuki Takimiya and D.S. Brewer eds., Cambridge, UK: 1981), 127-144.

⁵⁴ Pamela Yee, *Eugène Vinaver's Magnificent Malory: Exhibit Guide*, Camelot Project: Robbins Library Digital Projects, 2013). < <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/>>. Dorsey Armstrong pointedly rejects Vinaver's theory in her recent edition of Malory based on the Winchester MS: "Introduction," *Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur: A New Modern Translation Based on the Winchester Manuscript* (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2009), x.

The overall narratives in both versions are quite similar and the representation of knighthood remains generally the same. Both Caxton and Malory share the same idealization of the Arthurian past and perhaps even the nostalgic motivation to reclaim a cultural image that was disintegrating before their eyes. Finke and Shichtman note the unproductiveness of the critical debate between Caxton's print edition and the Winchester Manuscript, noting that many modern scholars have become needlessly entrenched in the rhetoric of authorial authenticity.⁵⁵ Finke and Shichtman characterize the two texts according to their vast differences in reading audience and the political implications these audiences embody. While both texts represent significant artifacts of the late medieval chivalric imagination the goals of this discussion involve an examination of the contemporary representation of knighthood in medieval romance. In the reading that follows I rely on Caxton's 1485 edition not because of its representation of textual wholeness, an issue which will be addressed at length below, but because of its wide contemporary dissemination and subsequent interaction with late-medieval cultural values.

Caxton's introduction to the 1485 edition of *Le Morte Darthur* offers a clear thesis for the printer's contribution to Malory's chivalric project. Responding to skepticism of Arthur's historical veracity, Caxton points to what he considers hard evidence of the fabled king's existence: "Fyrst, ye may see sepulture in the monasterye of

⁵⁵ Laurie Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, *King Arthur and the Myth of History* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004), 160.

Glastyughburye, And also in polycronycon in the 5 book the syxte chapytre, and in the seventh book the xxiii chapytre, where his body was buryed and after founden and translated in to the sayd monasterye” [First you may see the sepulcher in the monastery of Glastonbury, and also in the Policronicon, in the fifth book, the sixth chapter, and in the seventh book, the thirteenth chapter, where his body was buried and after found and transported to the said monastery.]⁵⁶ Caxton here references Ranulf Higden’s *Polycronicon*, a book of history in Latin that Caxton himself had previously published in English in 1480. Caxton indicates that Higden’s book contains authoritative historical references the location of Arthur’s burial, but the printer’s wording nearly suggests the body to have been “buried” in the book itself. Caxton goes on to cite other forms of memorial evidence, usually in the form of relics, memorials, or burial sites that reveal a plea to manifest the body of the king through the pages of his book.

While Malory’s book is easily the single most famous text published by William Caxton, it is only one entry in a much larger printing catalogue that Caxton scholar William Kuskin suggests indicates a material and intellectual consolidation of English culture into a coherent and imaginative grouping of texts invested with literary authority: the English literary canon.”⁵⁷ Kuskin extensively examines Caxton’s thematic publishing program that focused on the Nine Worthies, a canon of iconic figures popularly

⁵⁶ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, a2^v.

⁵⁷ William Kuskin, *Symbolic Caxton: Literary Culture and Print Capitalism* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 17.

understood to exemplify religious, political, and civic virtues.⁵⁸ According to Kuskin, Caxton mobilized the printing press, a new technology in English commerce, to promote a published narrative of civic unity. As Kuskin explains:

Caxton's critical program [...] organizes his disparate and shifting population of readers into a coherent body through the very social tensions that make an exclusive appeal to any one group of readers confining. Material and symbolic, physical and intellectual, Caxton's production of his readers as 'dyuers gentylnen' constructs them as unified subjects engaged with a vernacular canon.⁵⁹

This "coherent body" is simultaneously communal, corporeal, and textual. In much the same way that Arthur imagines a coherent body of knights "hole togyders," Caxton himself seems preoccupied with imposing order and wholeness by grouping together the works he published under the banner of civic exemplaria. In his preface to *Le Morte Darthur* Caxton introduces the system of order which he has imposed upon the text by enumerating the book's contents: "The somme is vvi bookes whyche conteyne the somme of 5 hondred & vii chapytres, as more playnly shal folowe hereafter" [The sum is twenty-one books which contain the sum of five hundred-seven chapters, as more plainly shall follow hereafter.]⁶⁰ This inventory, coupled with his previous reference to Malory's reduction of the French sources indicates Caxton's perception of the book's canonical completeness. This echoes Malory's own sense of wholeness that has in turn influenced

⁵⁸ A popular canon of virtue in the medieval and early modern periods, the so-called Nine Worthies included three pagans: Hector, Alexander, Caesar; three Jews: Joshua, David, Judas Maccabaeus; and three Christians: Arthur, Charles, and Godfrey of Bouillon: Kuskin, *Symbolic Caxton*, 197.

⁵⁹ Kuskin, *Symbolic Caxton*, 213.

⁶⁰ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, a4^r.

many generations of scholars' to consider *Le Morte Darthur* a "whole book." However, in much the same way that Malory's chivalric bodies fall apart unaided by the armor meant to contain them, the critical imposition of wholeness is unstable.

The phrase "whole book" has been bandied about in Malory scholarship since Eugène Vinaver's highly controversial yet monumentally influential *Malory: Works*. Originally published in 1954, Vinaver's edition was based on the then-recently rediscovered Winchester Manuscript of Malory's book, a version of the text that predates Caxton's edition and may have even been the exemplar from which Caxton drew. The Winchester Manuscript was a revelation as well as a challenge to scholars who had previously only known Caxton's edition of the text; it suggested at once a more authorial version of the book but also a more fragmentary version of the book's linearity. Based on his reading of the Winchester Manuscript, Vinaver theorized that Malory's text was *not* conceived as the extended and interlaced narrative offered by Caxton but was actually intended as a collection of eight distinct romance narratives, each representing a discreet plot structure that related to but operated independently of the other seven.⁶¹ As Vinaver explains,

⁶¹ Rather than a "whole book" Vinaver represents Malory's works as including (in order): *The Tale of King Arthur*, *The Tale of the Noble King Arthur that was Emperor Himself Through Dignity of his Hands*, *A Noble Tale of Sir Launcelot du Lake*, *The Tale of Sir Gareth of Orkney that was Called Bewmaynes*, *The Book of Sir Tristram de Lyones*, *The Tale of the Sankgreal Briefly Draw out of French Which is a Tale Chronicled for One of the Truest and One of the Holiest That is in This World*, *The Book of Sir Launcelot and Queen Guinevere*, and *The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon*. Eight separate works in total: Thomas Malory, *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory* 2nd ed., Vol. 1, Eugène Vinaver ed. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1967), xxxvi-xxxvii.

Instead of a 'single work' subordinate to an imaginary principle of all-embracing dramatic 'unity', what we have before us is a series of works forming a vast and varied panorama of incident and character. What their 'assemblage' may lose in harmony it gains in diversity and richness of tone, expressive of the author's real design.⁶²

Vinaver's suggestion deeply disturbed his contemporaries who had come to rely upon the novel-like internal consistency of Caxton's *Le Morte Darthur*. In the volume *Essays on Malory*, published in 1963, prominent scholars like D.S. Brewer and C. S. Lewis responded to Vinaver's theory with strong skepticism. Brewer in particular observes that Vinaver's suggestion shocked Malory's readers out of their long-held assumption of narrative linearity based on Caxton's edition, noting that it was "disagreeable to find that what we had been brought up on as one book, however muddled, was now supposed to be eight distinct books."⁶³ The following decades of scholarship ultimately rejected Vinaver's theory, finding comfort with a far greater degree of textual wholeness, even in the Winchester MS.⁶⁴ Like Brewer, scholars prefer to consider *Le Morte Darthur* a "whole book."

The notion of *Le Morte Darthur* as a "whole book" has eked its way throughout medieval scholarship and has been alternatively used to describe not only Malory's book but a number of other texts and manuscripts that appear to offer a tenuous expression of wholeness. Attributing the phrase to Caxton, Brewer titled his article "the hoole book" as

⁶² Eugène Vinaver, "Introduction." *Malory: Works* 1st ed. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1947), viii. Quoted in: Yee, *Eugène Vinaver's Magnificent Malory: Exhibit Guide*.

⁶³ D.S. Brewer, "the hoole book," *Essays on Malory*. J.A.W. Bennett ed. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1963), 41-63.

⁶⁴ Yee, *Eugène Vinaver's Magnificent Malory: Exhibit Guide*.

a challenge to Vinaver's argument. Brewer concludes triumphantly that even the final "greatness" Malory achieves in his last two books "cannot be severed from the earlier books."⁶⁵ Andrea A. Clough similarly argues for Malory's pursuit of wholeness in her article titled "'Malory's *Morte Darthur*: The Hoole Book.'" More recently, Marco Nievergelt uses the phrase to argue for Winchester's expression of authorial subjectivity, similarly assuming the phrase to have been Malory's.⁶⁶ Even Helen Cooper uses the phrase in her introduction to the text to describe Malory's own conception of his book.⁶⁷ Current scholarship on material culture has similarly appropriated the Malorian phrase "whole book." In 2005 Derek Pearsall used it to insist that the current scholarship suggesting a readable consistency in the compilation of medieval manuscript miscellanies actually "overestimate[s] the activity of the controlling or guiding intelligence of the scribe-compiler."⁶⁸ Seemingly in opposition to Pearsall's perspective, Kimberly K. Bell and Julie Nelson Couch deploy it to preface an essay collection generally geared toward examining the internal consistencies in the romance-heavy Oxford, Bodleian Library MS

⁶⁵ Brewer, "the hoole book," 63.

⁶⁶ Nievergelt, "Writing the 'Hoole Book' of King Arthur," 481.

⁶⁷ Cooper, "Introduction," *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript*, xiii.

⁶⁸ Derek Pearsall, "The Whole Book: Late Medieval English Manuscript Miscellanies and their Modern Interpreters" (*Imagining the Book*. Stephen Kelly and John J. Thompson eds. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepolis, 2005), 29. Pearsall attributes this phrase to Malory as well. Despite Pearsall's attitude in this article, he seems to have revised his position somewhat in his reflection on the Auchinleck Manuscript in 2016: "The Auchinleck Manuscript Forty Years On" (*The Auchinleck Manuscript: New Perspectives*. Susanna Fein ed. Suffolk, UK: York Medieval Press, 2016), 11-25.

Laud 108.⁶⁹ The rhetoric of the "whole book" has expanded far beyond Malory studies and has been mobilized as an epistemology for studying medieval manuscript miscellanies.⁷⁰ Pearsall, Bell, Couch and a number of other scholars have used Malory's reference to *Le Morte Darthur* as a "whole book" in order to draw comparisons between it and compiled texts that lack an identifiable compiler or scribe. The problem is: this phrase is not undeniably Malory's.

In editing the Winchester Manuscript Eugène Vinaver took a number of liberties with regards to rubrication and supplemental material. Most significantly, Vinaver used Caxton's edition to supplement eleven missing leaves at the end of the Winchester manuscript, a portion of the text that would have contained the deaths of Lancelot and Guinevere.⁷¹ In creating this supplement, however, Vinaver appears to have reached for Wynkyn de Worde's 1498 edition rather than Caxton's 1485 edition, which he cites as his primary editorial aid. As a result, Vinaver offers Malory's closing benediction as follows: "Here is the ende of the hoole book of kyng Arthur and of his noble knyghtes of the Rounde Table, that whan they were holé togyders there was ever an hondred and

⁶⁹ Kimberly K. Bell and Julie Nelson Couch, "Reading Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108 as a 'Whole Book'" (*The Texts and Contexts of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 108*. Kimberly K. Bell and Julie Nelson Couch eds. Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2011), 1-18.

⁷⁰ Felicity Riddy characterizes *Le Morte Darthur* as a kind of miscellaneous text since Malory himself describes his attempt to collect narratives from a variety of sources into a "hoole booke": "Divisions" in *Le Morte Darthur*, Stephen H.A. Shepherd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 883.

⁷¹ The Winchester MS ends at F 484^v, during Lancelot's final conversation with Guinevere. This scene corresponds to sig. ee3^r in STC 801. The text of Caxton's edition ends six leaves later on ee6^r.

forty. And here is the ende of *The Deth of Arthur*” [Here is the end of the whole book of King Arthur and of his noble knights of the Round Table that, when they were all together, numbered one hundred and forty. And here is the end of *The Death of Arthur*.]⁷² Here the phrase "hole booke" appears with the implication that it came from Malory, even though there is no way to verify this in the Winchester MS. Vinaver indicates the transition to supplemental material by a single open-bracket; six more pages of material follow before the bracket is closed without a footnote, giving even a critical reader every reason to assume that these six pages represent Caxton’s edition.⁷³

STC 801 tells a different story. The sentence in question is split over two leaves of Caxton's printed text, but in its entirety it reads: "Here is the ende of the booke [...] of Kynge Arthure & of his noble knyghtes of the rounde table, that whan they were hole togyders there was ever an C and xl" [Here is the end of the book of King Arthur and of his noble knights of the Round Table, that when they were whole together there was ever one hundred and forty]

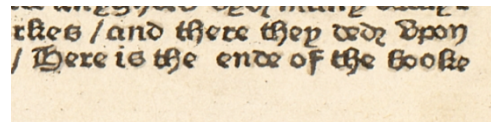


Figure 18: ee5^v from STC 801, Caxton's 1485 printing

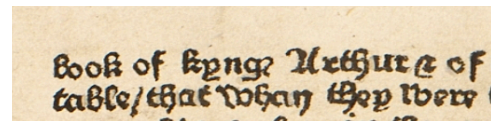


Figure 19: ee6^r from STC 801, Caxton's 1485 printing

(Figures 18 and 19).⁷⁴ The ellipsis here refers to a page break between signatures but the

⁷² Thomas Malory, *Works*, Eugène Vinaver ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1978, 2nd edition), 726.

⁷³ Vinaver, "Introduction," *The Works of Thomas Malory*, x. These brackets appear on 721 and 726.

⁷⁴ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 801, ee5^v-ee6^r. Images from: *The Malory Project*, Takako Kato director, Nick Hayward designer (<http://www.maloryproject.com/>, 31 July 2017).

the implication is clear: the word "hole" does not appear next to "booke." In what could be considered a surprising moment of scholarly self-sabotage, Vinaver offers a correction to what he considers past editors' misreadings of the final word on sig. ee5^v (Figure 18) as "booke," instead noting the "ensemble" implied by the worde "hoole."⁷⁵ This presents a typographical problem. Vinaver is right to question previous editions' assumptions that Caxton had simply doubled the word "book" since the spelling changes and Caxton was not in the habit of using catchwords in the 1485 edition; these words certainly appear to be separate. However, Caxton was also not in the habit of spelling "whole" as "hoole." In Caxton's edition, the word "booke" appears twenty-nine times, "hole" appears ninety-two times, and "hoole" only appears three times.⁷⁶ The appearance of the letter "k" on sig. ee5^v (Figure 18) is remarkably similar to that which we see in "book" and "kyng" on sig. ee6^f (Figure 19), as opposed to the "l" in "table" in the next line. Vinaver insists that the wholeness Malory implies by using the phrase "hoole boke" refers to the assemblage of narratives rather than a the novelistic interlacing of the whole book that Vinaver considers an artifice of Caxton's editing. An argument could be made for either a printer's typo or compositional flaw to have caused the Flemish "bâtarde" type Caxton used for vernacular texts to have blurred the distinction between "k" and "l."⁷⁷ The lack

⁷⁵ Vinaver, "Introduction," *The Works of Thomas Malory* 3 vol. 2nd ed. reprint with corrections, xlv.

⁷⁶ "hoole" appears one more time, in fact, but in reference to a hole in a tree rather than corporeal or social wholeness: k3^v.

⁷⁷ N.F. Blake notes that "Caxton imitated the presentation and letter forms of manuscripts": *William Caxton and English Literary Culture* (London, UK: Hambledon Press, 1991), 276.

of a descender on what would be the “h” and the presence of a lower diagonal leg on the “k” seem to invalidate Vinaver’s supposition. Since only one extant copy of Caxton’s edition contains these pages, we have no way to definitively verify Vinaver’s claims. At the very least, the typography of “booke/hoole” and the undeniable fact of the page break between it and “boke” present a significant problem with Vinaver’s use and treatment of the phrase.

This problem is further complicated by Wynkyn de Worde’s deployment of “hoole boke” in his 1498 edition of *Le Morte Darthur*. The final pages of Wynkyn's text represents the same sentence as follows: "Here is the ende of the hole booke of kyng

Arthur and of his noble knyghtes of the rounde table, that whan they were hole togyder, there was ever an hondred and xl" [Here is the end of the whole book of King Arthur and of his noble

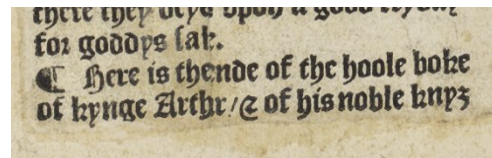


Figure 20: from STC 802, Wynkyn de Worde's 1498 printing

knights of the Round Table, that when they were whole together, there was ever one hundred and forty] (Figure 20).⁷⁸ Tsuyoshi Mukai argues that Wynkyn de Worde’s 1498 edition is far more than an edited reprint but may actually represent “a possible witness to Malory’s authorial text.”⁷⁹ Mukai cites a number of de Worde’s corrections to Caxton’s rubrics and clarifications of ambiguous pronouns as evidence that the printer had been working with both Caxton’s copy-text and the Winchester manuscript to produce an

⁷⁸ Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, STC 803, E3^f.

⁷⁹ Tsuyoshi Mukai, “De Worde’s 1498 *Morte Darthur* and Caxton’s Copy-Text” (*The Review of English Studies* 51.201: 2000), 26.

edition of the text more faithful to Malory than Caxton's. There is no way of knowing for certain whether the word "hoole" is de Worde's addition, de Worde's personal correction of Caxton, or a correction based on another exemplar like the Winchester MS. In either case, it seems that this small change, at least to de Worde, more accurately characterized Malory's "boke." As mentioned above, Malory uses the phrase "hole togyder" to express anxiety over chivalric disassembly and fragmentation. The small change Wynkyn de Worde appears to have made seems a natural reflection of the need to police the limits of the body chivalric through the corpus of a "whole book."

Andrea A. Clough notes that "Malory's fascination with wholeness and fragmentation makes its presence felt from the beginning of the work in the selection or addition of the imagery, and gradually comes to permeate and to unify the entire ensemble."⁸⁰ Despite Clough's exploration of fragmentation in *Le Morte Darthur*, she cannot help but project positivity over what she considers Malory's closing reassertion of wholeness and unity.⁸¹ Clough's argument reiterates what has been explained above regarding Malory's perception of English chivalry's decline but also exemplifies a way in which this same attitude toward reconstruction has extended into Malory scholarship post-Vinaver. Clough offers no direct explanation for titling her article "The Hoole Book," although this particular spelling more closely reflects Vinaver's edition than

⁸⁰ Andrea A. Clough, "Malory's Morte Darthur: The Hoole Book" (*Medievalia et Humanistica* 14, 1986), 139-140.

⁸¹ Clough considers Constantine's ascension to the Arthurian throne to be restorative but I would argue that this brief moment is undercut by Malory's consistent anxiety over fragmentation: Clough, "Malory's *Morte Darthur*: The Hoole Book," 151.

Caxton's or de Worde's. In fact, Clough quotes from Vinaver's edition even though its basic premise had been summarily rejected by the time Clough published. Vinaver's edition was so influential that Malory scholars are still using it, despite critical assessments of its inaccuracies and the number of widely-available corrective texts.⁸² Within the last two years Elly McCausland and K.S. Whetter, publishing in *Arthuriana* and *Speculum*, respectively, rely on Vinaver's edition as a primary text.⁸³ Whatever its origin, the prevalence and perpetuation of the phrase "whole book" reflects an editorial and critical desire to form wholeness out of something that, perhaps because of Malory's own anxiety of chivalric disassembly, appears inherently fragmented and unstable. We want to believe that Malory had succeeded in reconstruction a complete Arthurian body chivalric and so the "hoole boke" becomes retroactively Malorian.

⁸² P.J.C. Field, Helen Cooper, Stephen H.A. Shepherd, and Dorsey Armstrong, to name a few, have each produced editions that seek to correct Vinaver's version in their own way: *Le Morte Darthur: The Seventh and Eighth Tales*, P.J.C. Field ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1977); *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript*, Helen Cooper ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998); *Le Morte Darthur, or, The Hoole Book of Kyng Arthur and of His Noble Knyghtes of the Rounde Table*, Stephen H.A. Shepherd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004); *Sir Thomas Malory's Morte Darthur*, Dorsey Armstrong ed.

⁸³ Elly McCausland, "Interpreting Pained Bodies in Malory's *Morte Darthur*" (*Arthuriana* 26.4: 2016), 89-113; K.S. Whetter, "Inks and Hands and Fingers in the Manuscript of Malory's *Morte Darthur*" (*Speculum* 92.2: 2017), 429-446. Whetter's specific subject matter has prompted him to qualify his use of Vinaver, although Whetter's earlier publications also use Vinaver's edition without the same justification.

"Boke" and Body

I may be splitting hairs about this specific phrase; the rest of *Le Morte Darthur* certainly illustrates the completeness of Malory's vast Arthurian assemblage. Still, the prevalence of the phrase itself in the scholarship creates a correspondence between readers' palliative perceptions of textual wholeness and the vulnerable, fragmenting chivalric body that Malory imagines. As C.S. Lewis observed regarding the then-hot controversy between Caxton's novelesque presentation and Vinaver's eight-book model, "the choice we try to force upon Malory is really a choice for us. It is our imagination, not his, that makes the work one or eight or fifty. We can read it either way. We can read it now one way, now another. We partly make what we read."⁸⁴ In this sense, in analyzing Malory's representation of chivalry the scholars themselves have also attempted to reassemble Arthur's body chivalric. These scholars seem influenced by a pre-Vinaver principle of *Le Morte Darthur's* textual wholeness, albeit haunted by Vinaver's suggestion that the book is inherently fragmented. This sense of textual order operates in similar terms to my former treatment of the Auchinleck Manuscript, a miscellaneous text still capable of crafting wholeness despite the biblioclastic damage wrought upon its textual body. However, as I have argued, this wholeness rests entirely on the Auchinleck Manuscript's remarkably consistent engagement with chivalric materiality. Despite the clarity of purpose in Malory's authorial interjections, Caxton's

⁸⁴ C. S. Lewis, "The Prose *Morte*," *Essays on Malory*, J.A.W. Bennett ed. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1963), 22.

editorial commentary, and even the simple fact of Malory's sole genius (an element which, Derek Pearsall warns, we cannot impose upon a miscellaneous text or its scribes), Malory's sense of chivalric wholeness remains intrinsically fraught.⁸⁵ Not only does the text itself present inconsistencies with narrative and character but the critical and editorial traditions surrounding Malory's book have created so many discursive conflicts that a clear concept of textual authority is almost impossible to determine and, as Lewis suggests, only marginally productive.

As has been demonstrated in the preceding chapters, armor and armorial discourses represent the primary elements by which medieval romances create order and consistency. Despite readerly assumptions concerning Malory's attempt at chivalric revival, his disengagement with the materials of chivalry departs from the traditions constructed by earlier examples of medieval romance. Whereas Chrétien de Troyes addresses the problems presented by an unarmed chivalric body by regularly rearming that body, Malory offers no such solution, continually placing his knights in situations harmful, even fatal to life and limb. Finke and Shichtman reject historiographies that attribute this decline to the Wars of the Roses and instead claim that this self-destructive chaos is endemic to chivalry.⁸⁶ In this sense Malory's book represents the latest (i.e. brastyng) point in the ultimately entropic system of armorial discourses in medieval chivalric romance.

⁸⁵ Pearsall, "The Whole Book," 29.

⁸⁶ Pearsall, "The Whole Book," 29.

Conclusion

This study has examined three things: the medieval romance genre, the assemblage of chivalric identity, and the integral role armor plays in shaping our understanding of both. As a genre, the romance is generally focused on the deeds and reputations of the social elite in medieval society. The knights depicted in romance are almost always extensions of royal power, like Gawain and Lancelot, if not direct embodiments of that power, like Horn and Orfeo. Despite the apparent elitism of romance, the genre itself was exceedingly popular, experienced in some form by people on all levels of the social spectrum. In this way, the romance genre became a means by which individuals imagined themselves and their communities.¹ In defining the genre, Susan Crane attests to romance's role in medieval identity formation:

Romances do not claim to be coextensive with the contemporary world [...] but to reshape and meditate on the world. Like epics, they tell the stories of whole careers; but unlike epics, they do not envision their heroes primarily in service to society's collective need. Instead, romances contemplate the place of private identity in society at large.²

¹ Laurie Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, "Violence as Symbolic Capital in Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*" 119.

² I draw upon Benedict Anderson's term "imagined communities" via Geraldine Heng's assertion that these communities began to be imagined through romance narratives: Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London/New York: Verso, 1983); Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

Even if the identity being formed is an unattainable idealization (the average peasant in medieval England would probably not have opportunity to slay a dragon like Guy of Warwick), romances still offered aspirational models for the individual's cultural contribution.³ In this way, the primary subject of medieval romance, the knight, assembles and embodies numerous discourses of identity.

In many ways, a study of medieval romance is also a study of chivalric masculinity. The romance genre is preoccupied with imagining the medieval knight as a representation of masculine performance, and a great deal of the scholarship quoted here reflects this. This study focuses less on the binarism of gender and more on romance's negotiations with gendered materiality. The romances studied here demonstrate that chivalric identity is a static formation or a linear developmental process but an identity characterized by an inherent but remarkably unproblematic instability. This instability is an outcropping of chivalric materiality. The knight is both symbolically and physically enmeshed in armor, the hard materials of knighthood that articulate chivalric identity as an assemblage. The chivalric assemblage is impermanent, however, since both violent performance and practical necessity require armor to be periodically removed and reapplied. Thus, the chivalric subject regularly disassembles and reassembles as a function of his relationship with armor. These negotiations of identity, which I have referred to as armorial discourses, extend beyond gendered identity to articulate social,

³ William Caxton's preface to Malory's *Le Morte Darthur* articulates just such an exemplum: *Le Morte Darthur* (London: William Caxton, 1485. STC 801), a iii^r.

corporeal, material, and textual identities. In doing so, they represent one of the most significant ways in which medieval romances “contemplate the place of private identity.”

The motif of armorial assemblage is omnipresent in medieval chivalric romances. This is partially a result of practical necessity. The primary occupation of the chivalric subject is violence and to perform accordingly the knight must be protected. The consistency of armorial conventions in the romance genre, therefore, offers a valuable angle to consider the ways in which both medieval readers of romance and modern readers of romance-infused heroic narratives imagine themselves. Armorial discourses expand our understanding of material identity and its interaction with corporeality. In initiating the principles of medieval armorial discourses, Chrétien de Troyes’ romances demonstrate how arming and disarming the chivalric body structures not only identity but narrative as well. Additionally, armorial discourses reveal the interactions and codependences of social classes. In the Gawain romances in particular, the representation of advances in armorial technology records and validates artisanal labor through the lens of chivalric labor. Armorial discourses also articulate the exchanges between textuality and depictions of materiality. As we see in the Auchinleck Manuscript, the correspondence between chivalric and textual damage layers the legible surfaces of knightly bodies and broadens our understanding of the chivalric corpus.

What does it mean, then, when armorial discourses no cease to function according to tradition? This scope of this study accounts for the development of medieval armorial discourses in Chrétien de Troyes’ late twelfth-century romances to their breakdown in William Caxton’s printing of Malory’s *Le Morte Darthur* in 1485. *Le Morte Darthur*

reveals the “brastyng” point of chivalric ideals being not simply as a result of political strife and internal conflict but specifically as an outcropping of Malory’s dismissal of armorial conventions, a literary move that parallels the increasing redundancy of the chivalric subject in late-medieval warfare. This is not to say armorial discourses end after the fifteenth century. As Maurice Keen observes, a history of the end of medieval chivalry “has to be written in terms of change, not of decline.”⁴ In fact, we see chivalric armorial materiality on display in Edmund Spenser’s late sixteenth-century oeuvre *The Faerie Queene*, an early anachronistic celebration of romance knighthood. We even see armor deployed as an overdetermined extension of identity throughout modern superhero media. In cape and cowl, billionaire Bruce Wayne becomes Batman, the Dark Knight. Marvel’s *Iron Man* film franchise multiplies heroic identities through industrialist Tony Stark’s vast collection of armored suits. Modern culture continues to imagine heroism, especially heroism guided by codes of social, martial, and political conduct (i.e. chivalry), through its material components. This study focuses only on medieval iterations of armorial discourses but a great deal work has yet to be done on their continuations and futures. Armorial discourses persist in early modern and modern popular culture, emptied, perhaps, of specifically-medieval chivalric meaning. Nevertheless, they still provide valuable mechanisms for analyzing systems of political, economic, and gendered identity in post-medieval popular narratives.

⁴ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 249.

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