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# Theory Transposed: Idols, Knights and Identity

Nicolette Zeeman

The ideas and theories about the idol developed in medieval religious milieux impact on many aspects of the secular culture of the Middle Ages. Although from the Hebrew Scripture onwards the idol is described as something made of insentient, “dead” matter, writers also constantly recognise that idol worshipers attribute life to it; this means that for the Middle Ages the notion of the idol always raises the spectre of inner aliveness and sentience. We see this in medieval imaginings of the knight, whose heraldic iconography and chivalric accoutrements are so often reminiscent of the iconography of the pagan idol. In such heraldic and chivalric imagery, but above all in medieval romance, such impenetrable exteriors constantly raise questions about the possible inner life of the knight: much of Malory’s *Morte Darthur*, for example, pivots on a tension between the surface opacity of his armoured and often disguised men and the repeated signals of pained sentience within.

This essay is part of a larger project which explores how some of the very sophisticated theories of image use and abuse – ideas about idolatry and the idol – that were developed within the medieval church might also have impacted on secular culture.<sup>1</sup> While the transfer of the theory, language or iconography of idolatry to secular contexts is sometimes explicitly acknowledged, at other times it takes place in modes that are more subterranean – manifesting itself in underlying thought structures

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<sup>1</sup> For crucial questions, criticism and advice, many thanks to Mathilde Bruckner, Virginie Greene, James Simpson and Sallie Spence, during a happy year spent at the Radcliffe Institute – whom I also thank for the time to begin this project.

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or linguistic or iconographic connotations. I shall argue that in these new contexts the medieval figure of the idol takes on many new implications, to the point that it stands in tension with the anti-idolatry discourses in which the notion of idolatry was originally formulated. In these new contexts the figure of the idol may well retain its complexity, its “bodiliness,” its opacity, its fascination and exoticism; it may well continue to raise questions about deadness and aliveness, about surface appearance and what might be “inside”; but it may no longer necessarily carry a morally negative loading.<sup>2</sup>

Ideas about the image, idolatry and the figure of the idol – not least the “pagan” idol – are deeply imbricated in many areas of the secular culture of the Middle Ages. It is perhaps scarcely surprising that the theory, language and iconography of idolatry provide terms for thinking about materiality, bodies and artefacts. However, I shall propose here that by drawing attention to the surfaces of the experiential world and the intractably physical and corporeal nature of human, animal and artefactual life, the figure of the idol also raises – by contrast – questions of animacy and even psychological interiority. Connected to the sense that the idol might in fact be alive, “look back” or move, these are questions about what goes on within the body or behind the face. Paradoxically, in other words, the figure of the idol shapes much medieval thought about inner life, action and identity.

My main test case will be the historical and imaginary figure of the armoured knight, as seen in medieval illustrations, artefacts and romance. It is perhaps not entirely surprising that the theory, language and iconography of idolatry have a place here, given that they are very clearly present elsewhere in medieval courtly culture. As Michael Camille and others have shown, notions of secular idolatry (the “religion of love”) are pervasive in the culture and literature of erotic desire, where they are a means of thinking about the thrills and risks of pleasure, the body, sexuality, obsession and fetishism.<sup>3</sup> Nor is it just women who are the

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<sup>2</sup> This project owes an enormous debt to Michael Camille’s exploration of the medieval theory and iconography of the non-Christian idol in *The Gothic Idol*. In his inspirational book, Camille also anticipated other aspects of my project by recognising some of the areas of medieval culture where the notion of idolatry was not merely tolerated but even cultivated; he wrote, for instance, on idol-like automata, the “god” of money and the “idolatry” of erotic love in the Middle Ages. More recently, Sarah Stanbury has written on the idolatrous connotations of the secular image in Chaucer (101–16). Other important works in this area include Aston, *England’s Iconoclasts*; *Broken Idols*; Simpson, *Under the Hammer*.

<sup>3</sup> Camille, *Gothic Idol* chapter 7; for an influential early (and negative) reading of this phenomenon, see Robertson, *Preface to Chaucer* chapter 5.

objects of such idolatry, for medieval Arthurian romance is often startlingly clear about the idolisation of knights – the most egregious of whom is Lancelot, adored by both women and men.<sup>4</sup> Here, however, I am interested in a slightly different kind of work performed by the notion of idolatry in relation to the knight. I will be looking at the armoured and accoutred man, a figure who is substantially defined by being covered in elaborate protective equipment, formalised insignia and fantastical decorations. If much of this knightly paraphernalia enables identification, providing images and signs to be read by the onlooker, its coded forms and the fact that it covers the knight mean that it is also always obscuring and substitutive. If medieval romance constantly raises questions about knowing the self and the other, many of these questions are focused and intensified in the figure of the armoured knight. One trope underlying this figure – and in dialogue with the idea that the knight and his insignia are a readable “image” or “sign” – is that of the idol.

# I

In Judeo-Christian thought idolatry is worship of the wrong object or worship done in the wrong way. Idolatry is what other people do, and early Judaism defined itself against such practices – “I am the Lord thy God . . . Thou shalt not have strange gods before me” (Ex. 20.2-3).<sup>5</sup> Idolatry also refers to the incorrect use both of images and things more generally: “Thou shalt not make to thyself a graven thing, nor the likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or in the earth beneath . . . Thou shalt not adore them, nor serve them” (Ex. 20.4-5).<sup>6</sup> For Augustine idolatry is one way of describing the “enjoyment” of things, using them as ends in themselves, when they ought merely to be “used” in the pursuit of God (*On Christian Doctrine* 1.3; 9). More recent ways of describing this phenomenon, of course – those of psychoanalysis or “thing-theory,” for example – have associated idolatry on the one hand with getting hooked on things and their materiality, but, on the other hand, with the experience of what Bill Brown calls the “thingness” of

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<sup>4</sup> See Burns; also Burgwinkle chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> All scriptural references are to *The Holy Bible. The Douay Version*. See also Deut. 4.15-19; Wisdom 13-15.

<sup>6</sup> As a non-image using religion, Judaism insists that even an image (a “graven thing” or a “likeness”) of the true God is an idol.



objects. Brown speaks of sensing “what is excessive in objects . . . their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems” (5); but he also insists on the experience of “the thing baldly encountered” (5) – something rarer than it might seem, because signs and ideas tend to divert us from a recognition of the object *as a thing*. It is hard, Brown insists, to see the thing unless it in some way intrudes upon us – by hitting us or breaking, for instance. He cites Leo Stein to the effect that if “ideas are what we project,” then “things are what we encounter” (3).<sup>7</sup> The language of the idol may also imply something of this.

Deadness is a recurrent theme in Hebrew Scriptural and medieval discussions of the idol:

What doth the graven thing avail, because the maker thereof hath graven it, a molten and a false image, because the forger thereof hath trusted in a thing of his own forging, to make dumb idols? Woe to him who saith to wood: Awake. To the dumb stone: Arise. Can it teach? Behold, it is laid over with gold and silver, and there is no spirit in the bowels thereof. (Habakkuk 2.18-19)<sup>8</sup>

“Strange gods” are described as mere artefacts, made of inanimate stuff; their worshipers form them out of wood or stone “like the image of a man, or the resemblance of some beast” (Wisdom 13.13-14) and then attribute them with life. Classical theories of idolatry had long stressed the “made” aspect of gods and idols – the fact that humans make them out of inanimate or dead matter and then worship them as if they are alive.<sup>9</sup> Classical theorists also repeatedly claim that gods and idols originate in the images of rulers, historical figures or a beloved dead father or son.<sup>10</sup> Written in the Hellenistic world in the first century BC, the book of Wisdom echoes these ideas:

For a father, being afflicted with bitter grief, made to himself the image of his son who was quickly taken away; and him who had died as a man, he

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<sup>7</sup> See Stein 44. See also Fradenburg, “Making, Mourning,” and Robertson, “Medieval Things.”

<sup>8</sup> See also Isaiah 2.8; 44.9-20; Jeremiah 10.1-9; Wisdom 13.10-19; 15.15-17.

<sup>9</sup> See Herodotus, *The Histories* 2.172; Horace, *Satires* 1.8.

<sup>10</sup> See Minnis 31-34; Camille, *Gothic Idol* 50-56; Zeeman, “Mythography” 139-41. See also Freedberg 43: “when images are set among us, the dead are kept among the living and inert matter becomes lively – to such an extent that we may even be afraid of it.”

began now to worship as a god, and appointed him rites and sacrifices. (Wisdom 14.15)<sup>11</sup>

Stressing the metal, stone and wood out of which the idol is made, Wisdom reiterates that the idolater “prayeth to that which is dead” (13.18). As Aranye Fradenburg has said, “the term ‘idol’ describes an object of devotion when its ‘quickness’ is being negated” (“Making, Mourning” 26).

The underlying premise of the Hebrew Scriptures is thus that idolatry is meaningless making and unmaking – the idolater knows the idol is just material stuff and still worships it.<sup>12</sup> In fact, according to such texts, the idolater and idol are alike in that they share a kind of emptiness, a refusal to make meaning, an insentience. This idea too originates in the Psalms:

The idols of the Gentiles are silver and gold, the works of the hands of men. They have mouths and speak not; they have eyes and see not. They have ears and hear not; they have noses and smell not . . . neither shall they cry out through their throat. Let them that make them become like unto them; and all such as trust in them. (Psalm 113B.4-8)<sup>13</sup>

This last line is really a curse: “Let them that make them become like unto them.” There are medieval miracle stories that illustrate this idea, where idolators and image abusers actually appear like idols. In Robert Mannyng’s English pastoral manual *Handlyng Synne*, for example, a priest suddenly “sees” his congregation in terms of their sins (10167-260), and one of them looks “lyke a foul maumetrye” (10218). Jeffrey Hamburger records a fifteenth-century narrative that describes how Sister Clara Anna, a young nun involved in a feud over two patron saints at St. Katharinenthal, near Zurich, mocks an image of St John the Baptist, saying it looks like a woodcutter. She treats it as a dead image that can be insulted with impunity. As a result, she was miraculously “struck blind, dumb and unconscious,” as the author says, as “motionless as a

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<sup>11</sup> On the worship of distant dignitaries, see Wisdom 14.17-21; and Brown, ed., *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* 510-13.

<sup>12</sup> The vehemence and violence of many anti-idolatry discourses and iconoclastic practices suggest that those who enact them at some level believe in their power and even their “aliveness;” see Freedberg 406-7, but also chapter 14 as a whole.

<sup>13</sup> See also Psalm 134.15-18.

piece of wood” – remarkably like an idol, in other words (441).<sup>14</sup> Fradenburg expresses this identification of the idol with the idolater in terms of the relation prosthetic of the artefact to its maker – it manifests something insentient within the human subject: “if something of ‘us’ were to survive in the insentient signifier, that might mean that there’s something of the insentient signifier in ‘us’” (“Making, Mourning” 37).

And yet idolaters attribute life to their creations. Simpson speaks of a “profound indecision about whether images are alive” (60)<sup>15</sup> across the period, and he and Stanbury remind us that the very insistence that statues are dead reveals a constant fear that they might not be. For Stanbury, this is the “queer masquerade” (107) of the idol, as it operates in a space between life and death. In many medieval imaginative writings, non-Christian idolaters are portrayed as fantastical and ludicrous; they yell at their gods, they tell them that they have made them out of “stocks and stones,” and even threaten them with destruction if they do not do what they are asked.<sup>16</sup> The idol is “wood,” “stone” and “dumb,” but its worshipers animate it, treat it as a person, tell it to “awake,” to “arise,” and, bizarrely, ask it to enable them to do the things that it cannot itself do. The all-pervasive Scriptural and medieval idea that bad spirits inhabit idols, speaking and acting through them, is one rationalisation of this process.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, like the Hebrew Scriptures, these texts recognise that to make an image of something that appears to be alive leads quickly to believing that it is alive, a process that has been explored at length by a more recent theorist of the image such as David Freedberg.<sup>18</sup> The same assumption is reflected too in the many medieval images that portray the mutual and entwined gaze of the idol and the idolater; these too acknowledge the power of the image – even though

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<sup>14</sup> On the connection between the idolater and the idol, see Camille, *Gothic Idol* 7, 14, 276-9; Figure 140, a “friar idol” on a pilaster (Book of Hours, London, British Library, MS Stowe 17, fol. 123<sup>v</sup>); perhaps also Figures 141 and 144.

<sup>15</sup> See also Simpson, all chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> See for example, Bodel (lines 134-68, 1460-67, 1507-27); Lupack, ed., *Sultan of Babylon* (lines 276-7, 309-11, 1357-8, 2104-14, 2431-54). The ubiquitous Middle English coinage “stocks and stones” ultimately derives from the Hebrew Scriptures, and passages such as Wisdom 14.21, on those who “gave the incommunicable name to stones and wood” (“incommunicabile nomen lapidibus et lignis imposuerunt”); see Aston, *England’s Iconoclasts* 115, 120, 124; Stanbury 107.

<sup>17</sup> Camille, *Gothic Idol* 56-72; Simpson 54-5, 59.

<sup>18</sup> Freedberg 12, 30-31, 36-7, and passim; also Elkins chapter 5.

the viewer knows that it is a made thing – to transfix and to catch the viewer in its gaze, just like a living creature.<sup>19</sup>

Whereas the image refers beyond itself and in so doing lays claim to meaning, the idol is defined by its refusal to do either of these things. Just as for Brown, therefore, things are always in tension with ideas, and for Fradenburg the idol is one dimension of the artefact understood as a sign and a signifier,<sup>20</sup> so the medieval idol is always in tension with the image. And yet, even while repeatedly insisting on the obscurity and inanimacy of the idol, scriptural and medieval writings about idolatry paradoxically also return to what seems to be a pervasive proclivity to attribute reference, meaning and animacy to it. Somewhere within or behind the idol in these texts, in other words, lies the spectre of its imagined sentience or inner life.

A number of texts also associate colour or painting with the idol. We have already seen in the Psalms that “the idols of the Gentiles are silver and gold” (113B.4); in Wisdom we hear that the artist or carpenter makes “the resemblance of some beast, laying it over with vermillion, and painting it red, and covering every spot that is in it” (13.14). Later the same text adds that “the invention of mischievous men hath not deceived us . . . a graven figure with divers colours. The sight whereof enticeth the fool to lust after it; and he loveth the lifeless figure of a dead image” (15.4-5). One problem with colour is the way it enhances effects of naturalism and the attribution of life, making people forget that they are just looking at an image rather than the “real thing;”<sup>21</sup> this is the anxiety expressed in the Wycliffite and anti-image text, the *Lantern of Liȝt*, when it insists: “þe peyntour makip an ymage forgid wip diverse colours, til it seme in foolis iȝen as a lyveli creature” (84). Another problem with colour may be that it is visually alluring or (given the expense of some colours in the Middle Ages) a sign of wealth and indulgence – another manifestation of idolatry. This seems to be the concern acknowledged in the negative by Walter Hilton when in *De adoratione ymaginum* he claims in passing that “the causes of adoration” should not

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<sup>19</sup> See Figure 1; also Camille, *Gothic Idol* (Figures 12, 37, 41, 157, 158); or Dimmick, ed. (Figures 5, 9, 10, 12).

<sup>20</sup> “Accusing the signifier of being an ‘idol’ fights uncanniness by pronouncing the signifier dead. But then, just when we bring the idol back to life, turning stocks and stones into demons who prophesy falsely, we are obliged to admit that the signifier, like the artefact, is dead” (Fradenburg, “Making, Mourning” 28).

<sup>21</sup> On the association of colour with the attribution of life, see Freedberg 49-50; on the association of naturalism with the attribution of life more generally, see chapters 9-11.



be the “wood or stone” of an image or its beautiful painting.<sup>22</sup> Chaucer may also invoke some combination of these ideas when the narrator of the Knight’s Tale says of the artist of Diana’s temple that “Wel koude he peynten lifly that it wroghte; / With many a floryn he the hewes boghte” (2087-8). With varying degrees of tentativeness, art historians have considered the possibility that the avoidance of colour in some later medieval art (such as the northern European fashion for leaving religious wooden sculpture unpainted) might be one response to a concern about idolatry.<sup>23</sup>



Figure 1: Pagan Worship, detail of manuscript illumination, French, 1375-77, Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Raoul de Presles, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS fr. 22912, fol.2v. Reproduced by kind permission.

<sup>22</sup> “Pro eo quod talis ymago de ligno vel lapide adoratur, vel pulcre depingitur . . . quia iste non sunt cause adoracionis” (Hilton, *De adoratione ymaginum* 193).

<sup>23</sup> Baxandall discusses the giving up of colour and German iconoclasm, but refuses to link them in any categorical way (see 42-48 and *passim*); but see Hamburger 216, 300; Camille, “The Iconoclast’s Desire.”



And what about the iconography of the idol? Figure 1 is a detail from the famous illustration that opens Raoul de Presle's French translation of Augustine's *City of God* in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS fr. 22912 (fol.2<sup>v</sup>). The full image shows the Jews, Christians and pagans with their respective objects of worship.<sup>24</sup> On the right are the Jews, censing the ark, a box with a pointed roof and a scroll emanating from it: this is the "word" of God and its texts. In the middle are the Christians with a priest holding a book before an altar with a chalice standing underneath an image of the crucified Christ. On the left (and in the detail shown here) are the pagan worshipers, with two naked anthropomorphic figures on an altar gesturing towards them – such unclothed and mobile bodies are an extremely widespread way of imagining the pagan idol. As can be seen again at the right side of Figure 2, these bare figures standing on pillars, pedestals, plinths or altars, often painted gold and holding shields or spears, seem to be imitations of classical statues.<sup>25</sup>



Figure 2: (?)Jupiter, Janus and Saturn on a stage (left) and pagan gods on an altar (right), manuscript illumination, French, 14th century, Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Raoul de Presles, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale and Université de Strassbourg, MS 0.552, fol.159<sup>v</sup>. Reproduced by kind permission.

Their swaying bodies and their solid supports foreground their corporeal materiality, combining militarism with a degree of eroticism; often,

<sup>24</sup> The full image is reproduced in Camille, *Gothic Idol* (Figure 106).

<sup>25</sup> See also the naked trio of gods in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS fr 172, fol. 186<sup>r</sup> and Janus at 205<sup>v</sup> (volume reproduced on *Gallica*).



as in Figure 1, these idols look at their worshipers, participating in mutual gaze of seeming fascination. On the left of Figure 2, however, we also see theatrical representations of the gods – ridiculed at length in the second book of Augustine’s *City of God*. With their exotic headgear and other identifying markers, these appear to be, from left to right, Jupiter, Janus and Saturn (with a small scythe).<sup>26</sup> This trio is clearer in Figure 3, where each god has his own plinth.



Figure 3: Jupiter, Janus and Saturn on individual altars, manuscript illumination, French, 14th century, Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Raoul de Presles, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS fr. 6271, fol. 114v. Reproduced by kind permission.

Such idol images draw on the huge resources for iconography to be found in late-antique and medieval mythographical and astrological commentaries, myth collections and encyclopaedic texts, writings that often explicitly connect the pagan gods with idolatry.<sup>27</sup> In describing the characteristic iconography of the gods, many of them also speak of *imag-*

<sup>26</sup> See also Camille, *Gothic Idol* 61–63 and Figures 31 and 32.

<sup>27</sup> Sez nec; Smalley; Minnis 8–30; Zeeman, “Mythography.”

*ines* (“pictures”) of the gods or comment that a god *pingitur* (“is painted”) in such and such a way;<sup>28</sup> although some modern readers have hypothesised that what is being referred to here are primarily imagined and textual “images,” some of the manuscripts do contain images of the gods, such as the late eleventh-century pen and ink illustration to a copy of Martianus Capella’s *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* illustrated in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Pagan gods, pen and ink drawing, south German, late 11th/early 12th century, glossed Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, MS Clm. 14271, fol.11<sup>r</sup>. Reproduced by kind permission.

<sup>28</sup> Smalley 110-21, 160-83; Minnis 20-21; Zeeman, “Mythography” 139-41.



Here in the middle on the left Jupiter sits on his throne; Mars appears below in his chariot, accompanied by a wolf, with Pavor (Fear) looking back at him; the earth goddess Cybele is above; in the centre in his chariot is Apollo, and on the right the ubiquitous Saturn, holding a serpent with its tail in its mouth and a scythe.<sup>29</sup> Each of these gods, as in so many mythographical and astrological texts, has his or her own headgear and identifying equipment; this can be seen in Dijon Bibliothèque Municipale MS 448, fol.63<sup>v</sup> (Figure 5).



Figure 5: The Planets and their spheres (left to right, Jupiter, Mars, Sol, Saturn, Luna, Mercury, Venus), pen and ink drawing with colour, (?)Abbey of Beze, Burgundy, first quarter of the 11th century, *Tractatus super astronomiam*, Dijon, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 448, fol.63<sup>v</sup>. Reproduced by kind permission.

<sup>29</sup> On this image, see Sez nec 167-68; for Bersuire's description of the "picture" of Mars, see Minnis 20. Compare other pagan gods, usually with headdresses, in Sez nec (Figures 13, 20, 31, 42, 61, 68, 70).



Other iconography, however, casts the pagan idol as a composite human-animal figure, often with a horned, grotesque or animal head, or with other animal features; Camille illustrates several of these, such as the clawed and horned Jupiter in Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M 751, fol.29<sup>v</sup>, the cat-headed god in the Winchester Bible, fol.350<sup>v</sup>, the simian figures in Bibliothèque Nationale MS fr. 13502, fol.21<sup>r</sup>, or the remarkable antlered Diana drawn by the enthusiastic Classicist, Matthew Paris, in the *Chronica majora*, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 26, p.7.<sup>30</sup> Such composite or metamorphic figures echo Wisdom describing idols in “the resemblances of beasts” (“similitudines animalium”) (13.10);<sup>31</sup> but they also recall Classical mythology and the shape-shifting that is so central to it and the *raison d’être* of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

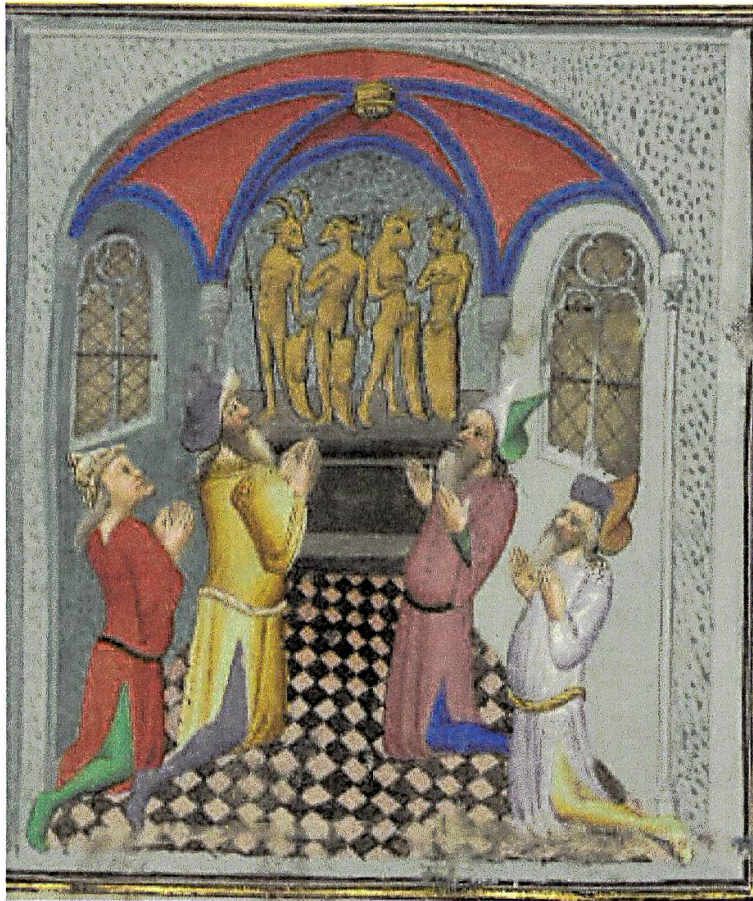


Figure 6: Hybrid Idols, manuscript illumination, French, 15th century, Mandeville, *Le Livre des merveilles du monde*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS fr. 2810, fol 184<sup>r</sup>. Reproduced by kind permission.

<sup>30</sup> Camille, *Gothic Idol* (Figures 34, 36, 38, 59; see also Figures 14, 35, 41, 65, 68, 70, 72).

<sup>31</sup> See also Wisdom 13.14; 15.18-19.

Figure 6, on the other hand, takes its inspiration from a tradition of travels to the east; the figures with animal heads that appear here illustrate a passage from the French text of Mandeville's *Livre des merveilles du monde* in one of the manuscripts possessed by the Duc de Berry. The Mandeville author (here cited in Middle English) is at this point very explicit about this type of hybrid idol, which he claims to find on the isle of Thana, near India. Here the inhabitants worship natural phenomena, which the author calls *simulacra*, such as the heroes Hercules and Achilles; but they also worship *idols*, that is hybrid objects of worship made out a mixture of natural forms:

And ydoles is an ymage made of lewed wille of man that man may not fynden among Kyndely [natural] thinges, as an ymage that hath iiij. hedes, on of man, another of an hors or of an ox or of sum other best that no man hath seyn after kyndely disposicioun. (Seymour 121)<sup>32</sup>

To sum up so far then, the medieval idol is not entirely unreadable; the identifying accoutrements of the pagan gods are, after all, legible identifiers. Nevertheless, what these various figures share is an emphasis on materiality, bodiliness and a broader ethos of semantic confusion and impenetrability; they mingle accoutrements, headdresses and references to antiquity; they combine human forms, nakedness and animal parts in strange conjunctions of different bodies and cultures. They can be fascinating, exotic or grotesque. It is true that the Christian image is by no means always completely "readable" either; nevertheless, it is always understood either directly or indirectly to point beyond itself to the true object of worship, God. This is precisely what the pagan and non-Christian idol does not do, instead drawing the eye and the desire of the beholder into itself and its own opaque body. And yet, whether anthropomorphic or animal-like, whether swaying, pointing or falling, the pagan idol constantly simulates life; repeatedly accused of being "dead matter," it nevertheless constantly poses the possibility of inner "aliveness."

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<sup>32</sup> The passage is in the French text but not in Odoric of Pordenone, the main source at this point; see 247. See further Camille, *Gothic Idol* 158; Higgins 226-7, 242-6.

## II

In fact, the image or the idol is in the Middle Ages a quite commonly-used metaphor with which to think about embodied identity and raise questions of interiority, intention and devotion. According to John Bromyard in the *Summa praedicatorum*, for example, hypocrites are like images: they look good, but they do nothing and are dead inside. Making a beautiful image outwardly, the hypocrite is like a craftsman –

qui facit imagines illas, exterius operari incipit, illasque partes plus ornat, & non dat vitam interius, nec multum de interiori curat decore; natura vero quae hominem producit vivum, econverso interius incipit, a corde.

(who makes . . . images; he begins to work on them externally and ornaments those parts more; [but] he does not give life inwardly, nor does he care much for the internal decoration; truly, Nature who produces the living man, begins in contrast internally, with the heart). (2, fol.165r)<sup>33</sup>

Citing Psalm 38.7 on the transience of the image, Bromyard points to a tension between embodied appearance and an imagined interior that is somehow at odds with that appearance. In *The Scale of Perfection* Walter Hilton articulates a much more devotional version of the idea according to which appearance and action “without the herte folwyng” are empty:

For wite thu weel, a bodili turnynge to God without the herte folwyng is but a figure or a likenes of vertues and no soothfastnesse. Wherefore a wrecchid man or a woman is he or sche that leueth al the inward kepinge of hymself and schapith hym withoute oonli a fourme and likenes of hoolynesse, as in habite and in speche and in bodili werkes . . . (1,1 [31])<sup>34</sup>

Johannes of Hauvilla’s elliptical version of this trope in the *Architrenius*, written two centuries earlier, suggests that it has a long pedigree; referring to intellectual emptiness, he says that vain philosophical students come to study like statues and leave in the same state: “statue veniunt statueque recedunt” (“arrive as statues and depart as statues” (Book 3, chap. 21 line 406). They are empty shams.

There are also political versions of this idea. An anonymous fourteenth-century Bishop was recorded as having commented that the vio-

<sup>33</sup> Bromyard also compares hypocrites to tomb mounds and to the images on them.

<sup>34</sup> On the image and idol in Hilton, see Watson.



lent French King Philippe le Bel is not even living – “non erat homo, nec bestia, sed imago” (“he was neither man nor beast but an image”) (Vigor 632) – he may be handsome, but he is without inner life or feeling.<sup>35</sup> Such words no doubt echo Zacharias 11.17, “O pastor et idolum derelinquens gregem” (“Oh shepherd and idol, that forsaketh the flock”). The fifteenth-century Middle English prose translation of Deguileville’s *Pelerinage de l’ame* makes absolutely clear that the figure of the idol underlies this trope. Criticising the ineffectual rulers of the time, it describes them as being like a “dede ymage,” or “an ydole, or an ymage, that nothyng avaleth;” echoing Deguileville’s use of the term *estatue*, the text explains that they are “voyde of al maner of vertue, right as an Image that nought hath of manlyhede, but only of lykenesse, by maner of shap withouten.” Indeed, the text goes on to say that kings who fail to become meaningful “signs” by doing good deeds are just stuffed manikins:

they faren right as done weryels [scarecrows] of yimages made of clothe, stopped with strawe, that holdith in his hand a bowe, bent to fere away the foules oute of the corne. (Book 4, chap. 29 fol. lxxvi)<sup>36</sup>

Here the conceptual overlap between the idea of the image and the idol means that both have become a means of thinking about a life so unproductive or destructive that it might as well be inanimate or dead matter.

A rather different use of the comparison recurs in medieval love literature. We find it in Chaucer’s description of Troilus when he discovers that he is to lose Criseyde, “ful lik a ded ymage, pale and wan” (*Troilus and Criseyde*, Book 4 line 235). This idea of the “dead image,” which harks back to a number of thirteenth-century French love allegories that describe the lover as transfixed like an image/idol, describes Troilus as drained of colour, animacy, even life itself.<sup>37</sup> The trope is de-

<sup>35</sup> See also Vigor 653; compare the bishop’s claim that “forma quidem Philippum caeteris antecellare, sed virtutibus vacuum esse” (“indeed, Philip excels others in appearance, but is empty of virtues” [624]).

<sup>36</sup> There is no equivalent to this passage in the French, though for the term *estatue*, see Guillaume de Deguileville, *Pelerinage de L’Ame* (lines 7250, 7299-342); see also Camille, *Gothic Idol* 284.

<sup>37</sup> See Stanbury 106. For earlier love texts where the transfixed lover is likened to an image/idol, see Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun (lines 2282-8); Nicole de Margival (lines 1120-25); Tibaut (lines 2182-85). All these texts – and the many romances that exploit the same motif – exploit the tension between the immobility of the lover’s body and the amorous life that is nevertheless at work unseen within.

veloped by the translator and poet thought to be Charles d'Orléans, imprisoned in England in the early fifteenth century. Describing himself growing older, he tells how he is visited in a dream by a personification of Age, who cruelly tells him that young people mock him, ironically, "Saiying, 'O God, what ioy yond drye ymage / May do unto a fayre lady likyng'" (2584-85).<sup>38</sup> Here, as in the satirical texts noted just now, the "drye ymage" signals empty show and ineffectuality. But as the poet describes himself trembling at the truth that he is too old for love, he also comes to look more like the dazed Troilus: "Thus nyst y lo what best was to ben wrought, / But even format [confounded] stood like a dombe ymage" (2650-1). The dismayed lover has become a kind of tomb to his own love, an extreme example of how a human being might identify with, and feel like, an inanimate thing.

And yet, in the Middle Ages as now, to be "like a stone" could also signal the lack of feeling or sentience. When in *Troilus and Criseyde* Pandarus advises Troilus to give up loving Criseyde, Troilus tells him that he would have to be a "stone" to do so (Book 4, lines 466-9). A different twist is given to this trope in an early Latin body and soul debate; here the desperate soul, faced with the punishments of hell, wishes that it was an animal or an inanimate object, so it could not suffer:

O deus, O utinam  
 Dedisses cuiuspiam  
 Me fuisse volucris  
 Corpus vel quadrupedis.  
 Utinam volatile  
 Essem vel aquatile  
 Animal, vel marmoris  
 Pars vel truncus arboris...

(Oh God, would that you had given me the body of some bird or four-footed animal. If only I were a flying or swimming animal or a piece of marble or the trunk of a tree . . .). (Heningham 1717-24)

Here references to wood and stone ("marble or . . . tree") again make it clear that the subtext is the idol, always made of "stocks and stones." Things could get so bad that a soul might actually wish not to be human. No doubt this is always a thought that underpins the fascination of the idol, as it hovers on the borderline of animacy and inanimacy.

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<sup>38</sup> For a development of this reading, see Zeeman, "The English Charles."

## III

I shall now look at the armoured knight, as seen in a range of medieval artefacts, texts and images, and, finally, in some passages from Malory's *Morte Darthur* and its sources. What I am ultimately interested in here is an imaginative and literary version of "the armoured man," though this may nevertheless have implications for the self-understanding of the historical culture of the medieval military classes.

The illustration of the three classes from *Image du monde*, London, BL, MS Sloane 2435, reproduced on the front of the hardback *Riverside Chaucer*, shows a priest, a knight and a labourer (fol.85<sup>r</sup>). Although you can see the faces of the labourer and the churchman, the knight is masked by his helmet. No doubt this reflects the practical need to cover up when fighting – except he is not fighting here. Instead, along with his armour, the "visored face" seems to be a sign of the knight's need, but also his power, not to be seen. Although by no means all images of knights have a visored face, images like this illustrate a tendency toward masking and occlusion that seems to be central to the medieval iconography of the knight. Sculptured knights with their heads enclosed in "great helmets," for example, can be seen on the west front of Wells Cathedral; these are thought to have emanated from a workshop that also produced funerary monuments across England in the 1260s and 70s, and influenced tomb sculpture in south west England more generally.<sup>39</sup> The wonderful armoured "machine man" in Figure 7 is an early example of a strikingly large number of English tomb effigies where the knight is entirely masked in his armour.<sup>40</sup> This particular figure, strangely both lying and in "walking" pose, illustrates vividly how the armoured man could look more like a thing than a person. He is nothing less than a study in obscured identity.

Of course there were many accoutrements that could identify the knight.<sup>41</sup> Even on the Furness tomb you can see the shield that, when he was alive, and perhaps also at one time on the tomb, would have shown the knight's heraldic arms or "colours." The primary means of identification in the very visual and public world of knightly performance,

<sup>39</sup> Hurtig 28, 118-22; Tummers 79; also Dressler.

<sup>40</sup> For the fully helmeted knight see Tummers (64, and Figures 18, 20 and 42); Hurtig (115-16 and Figures 110, 111, 112, 190, 191). On the Furness sculpture and its distinctive "torsion," see Lindley 43-44; also more generally, Hurtig 120-31.

<sup>41</sup> These were developed partly because of the obscuring of the face that resulted from armour and the visored helmet; see Pastoureau, *L'Art héraldique* 17-28; *Armorial des chevaliers* 7-8; "Heraldry" in Hourihane, gen. ed, *Grove Encyclopedia* vol. 3 302-21 (305-6).





Figure 7: Armoured knight effigy, Urswick limestone, English, 1250-75, Furness Abbey, Lancashire. Reproduced by kind permission.

chivalric insignia appeared on shields, tunics, ceremonial helmets, flags and horse coverings, not to mention their replication in images, sculptures and on tombs. Figure 8 comes from the “A” copy of the fifteenth





Figure 8: Edmund of Arundel, Count of Salisbury and the Countess, Salisbury Roll A, London, British Library, MS Add. 45133, fol.55r © British Library Board. Reproduced by kind permission.

century Salisbury Roll. It shows the Duke and Duchess of Salisbury with their ensign, a golden lion on a red background and trimmed in black, painted on his armour, sculpted on his helmet crest, and sewn on her

cloak.<sup>42</sup> And yet this wonderful image also shows how these heraldic signs are substitutes for more direct modes of identification; readable signs and images, they also mask the person behind – in this, the “A” version of the Roll, the Duke’s face is entirely unseen, shut in its tournament helmet. This is what Michel Pastoureau calls the “ambivalence” of the identifying crest and the masked face, signs that both show and dissimulate (“Déguiser ou dissimuler?” 134).<sup>43</sup>

Other historians have recognised this chivalric interplay of revealing and concealing, of readable and unreadable surfaces. Where earlier generations (most notably Johan Huizinga) saw later medieval chivalric ritual and insignia as decadent and in effect “empty,” more recent historians and literary scholars have stressed the military and political, social and identity-forming, functionality of this kind of chivalric show and performance.<sup>44</sup> The aristocratic and military classes used such ritual and insignia for a purpose. These issues are raised in Fradenburg’s seminal study of performance and power in late-medieval Scotland, *City, Marriage, Tournament*, and in Susan Crane’s fine study of ritual and clothing, *The Performance of Self*. Crane questions widespread narratives about the emergence of an apparently autonomous inner self in the later Middle Ages, writing subtly about the interplay of group identity, material form and the subject in the culture of chivalry; among other things, she explores how knightly identity derives from the dynamic interplay of heraldic icons – and in particular animal icons – and the knight who “impersonates” them. Nevertheless, in my view both Crane and Fradenburg underplay the ways that, from an early period, chivalric culture and its literature constantly pose questions (even if they do not answer them) about what goes on in the heads of its subjects. Crane, for example, continues to insist on the role of public and social judgement in arbitrating chivalric identity, prioritising the outside world over questions of

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<sup>42</sup> Edmund of Arundel, Count of Salisbury and the Countess, *Salisbury Roll A*, London, British Library MS Add. 45133, fol.55r. This is a copy of the original Roll of c.1463 (now pp.176-225 of *Writhe’s Garter Book*, London, British Library Loan MS 90). Made between 1483 and 1485, the copy alters some of the original imagery and heraldry, and adds new figures; now split up, part is in *Writhe’s Garter Book* (146-58) and part in London, British Library MS Add. 45133 (fols 52-55v). See Payne 190-3, where there are further illustrations. I have used Salisbury Roll A because its knights are visored, whereas they are not in the earlier version.

<sup>43</sup> See also Crane 108, 121-4.

<sup>44</sup> See Vale, *War and Chivalry*; Vale, *Edward III*; Keen; Fradenburg, *City, Marriage, Tournament*; Crane 122 and passim. But see also Huizinga.



interiority (Ch. 4).<sup>45</sup> And Fradenburg's emphasis on the moulding of the chivalric self to the mechanisms of outward show (perhaps like her emphasis on the way that artefacts point to some "insentience" in their makers) means that the emphatically external chivalric world she describes still sounds a little like the "empty" one described by Huizinga.<sup>46</sup>

I am not in this essay going to argue that late medieval chivalric art and literature is exclusively focused on the psychic life of its visored and occluded knights. But I am going to argue that it frequently poses questions about what goes on "within" – and that a recurrent part of the debate about the nature of chivalric performance is the question: "what is inside" the head of the armoured knight?<sup>47</sup> The medieval theory, language and iconography of the idol contribute to these ruminations. Just as the figure of the idol allows medieval thinkers to negotiate the interplay of the thing and the sign, material surface and inner life, deadness and aliveness, so too the idol underlies the way that chivalric culture reflects on the dynamic of external show and hidden inner life in the armoured man.

The knight's masked body and heraldic insignia make him remarkably reminiscent of the pagan idol.<sup>48</sup> These fabulous forms of chivalric display were designed to induce awe, something for which Malory tellingly uses the simultaneously religious and secular term *worship* ("honour," "respect," "renown," as well as "veneration," "reverence" *MED*). The elaborate colours of heraldic insignia (only seven of them, their use covered by strict rules) had their own logic; but colours were also associated with the idol. Knightly insignia and the tournament crests that go with them, many of them sculpted and three-dimensional and made of leather, wood, cloth, paint or feathers, have their place in medieval military history; but they are also surely somewhat reminiscent of images of

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<sup>45</sup> On p.127 Crane cites Patterson arguing a much more monolithic version of this position (Patterson 168-79).

<sup>46</sup> See above.

<sup>47</sup> For a twentieth-century literary reflection on the same issue, see Italo Calvino's short story *The Non-Existent Knight*.

<sup>48</sup> Pastoureau lists the figures attributed with imaginary heraldic insignia in the Middle Ages: Old and New Testament characters, the persons of the Trinity, Charlemagne, Roland, the Nine Worthies, Arthurian knights – but also the historical and mythical heroes and gods of antiquity (*Armorial* 13-16); also "Heraldry" in Hourihane, gen. ed., *Grove Encyclopedia* vol. 3 pp. 302-21 (310-12).

the pagan gods with their accoutrements and fantastical headdresses.<sup>49</sup> Even the “totemic” animals of chivalric insignia, these “half-animate, mask-like, not quite human” (Crane 107) figures, strikingly recall the hybrid pagan idol.<sup>50</sup> These features could be illustrated from many late medieval handbooks of jousting, heraldry rolls, chivalric histories and romances. Folio 40<sup>r</sup> of British Library MS Cotton Nero D.IX, a fifteenth-century copy of Antoine de la Sale’s chivalric narrative *Jean de Saintré*, for example, shows two jousting and visored knights, one with a golden antlered deer and one with a thistle for a crest.<sup>51</sup> Both the *Grand* and *Petit armorial équestre de la Toison d’Or*, made in Lille in the mid fifteenth century, illustrate an extraordinarily flamboyant series of visored knights on horseback whose elaborate helmet crests include a crown, dragons and two arms holding a broken heart.<sup>52</sup>

Figure 9 comes from the famous fifteenth-century French manuscript, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS fr. 2695, of René d’Anjou’s *Livre des tournois*.<sup>53</sup> Although this book is an amalgam of practices from across Europe and is no longer thought to illustrate historical events, it documents something of the imaginative reach of the culture of the late medieval tournament. Among the crests pictured here are, at the top among the ladies, a bear’s head, and below, starting at the right, what appears to be a black dog/wolf with a bone, a basket of flowers, a red dog/wolf, and an arm pulling the hair of a wildman – or is it holding a decapitated head? These knights are not just, I think, displaying their own “kind of idolatry” or “fetishiz[ation] of the material” (Fradenburg *City, Marriage, Tournament* 201). Admirably viewed from the stands, they are themselves, if anything, secular idols.

To return once more to the late medieval chivalric tomb, we can see that this demands the same ambiguous religio-secular “reverence” for

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<sup>49</sup> The crest has a long pedigree, though its use reached a height in 1340-1460; see “Heraldry” in Hourihane, gen. ed., *Grove Encyclopedia* vol. 3 pp. 302-21 (309-11); Crane 121; and René d’Anjou 30-31.

<sup>50</sup> On the fact that most heraldic icons do not allude to pre-Christian totems see Pastoureau, *L’Art héraldique* 15, 17; but see also “Heraldry” in Hourihane, gen. ed., *Grove Encyclopedia* vol. 3 302-21 (306-9); and Crane makes the case that an anthropological or structural “totemism” of lineage can nevertheless be seen in chivalric animal insignia (111-21).

<sup>51</sup> An image of this can be found on <http://www.scalarchives.com/web/index.asp>. For this text, see Antoine de La Sale, Introduction.

<sup>52</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, MS 4790 and Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS Clairambault; see Pastoureau, *Histoire symbolique* (Figures 26-29).

<sup>53</sup> On this text and manuscript, see René d’Anjou 8-19.

the dead knight and his equipment that is solicited by these images. Medieval churches, one of whose roles was to be what Keen calls “the mausolea of chivalry” (178) were commonly draped with the banners and insignia of the nobility who were buried or memorialised there.<sup>54</sup>



Figure 9: Knights in tournament equipment, detail, pen and watercolour drawing, French, 15th century, René d'Anjou, *Le livre des tournois*, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS 2695, fols.100<sup>v</sup>-101<sup>r</sup>. Reproduced by kind permission.

<sup>54</sup> These knightly accoutrements were often bequests to the church: see Hurtig 214-19; Vale, *War and Chivalry* 88-95; Binski 97, 105; for evidence of concern about the use of arms in churches, see Baxandall 82-3.



Tombs often included not only an image or effigy of the knight, but also of his helmet (and in northern Europe frequently his crested tournament helmet), as well as his shield, banners, tunic or gloves.<sup>55</sup> Sometimes the actual equipment (the knight's "achievements") was displayed; the only English site where these survive today is the tomb of Edward, the prematurely dead Black Prince, in Canterbury Cathedral.<sup>56</sup> In cases such as this it seems clear that the knight's equipment had an element of the "secular relic" to it.<sup>57</sup> This is exactly the implication of the satirical late-fourteenth-century *Pierce the Ploughman's Crede*, with its attack on over-decorated churches shining "with schapen scheldes," "tombes opon tabernacles" and "Knyghtes in her conisantes [emblems] clad for the nones, / All it semed seyntes y-sacred opon erthe" (Barr, ed., lines 176-86). Equally striking is the heraldic method of turning a knight's insignia, helmet and crest into a single combinatory image, widespread in heraldic armorials,<sup>58</sup> but also on "death shields" (*Totenschilde*): see Figure 10.<sup>59</sup> Especially common in northern Europe and often hung in churches, death shields could be either painted or three-dimensional; in some early examples, the shield and helmet were sometimes real military equipment, but later on they were often copies, and the helmet was more likely to be a decorated jousting helmet. It is true that we might scarcely expect a face to be looking out from the helmets of these dislocated heraldic compilations; nevertheless, it seems entirely in accord with the knightly iconography we have been exploring that, both in the armorials and the death shields, the helmet visors are invariably shut. Images and artefacts such as these suggest that the Middle Ages was able to reflect on, and in varying degrees acknowledge, the fetishisation of the figure of the knight and the forms of "worship" accorded to him. I propose further that one of the structuring presences that made some of these reflections possible was the idol, the figure that always in the Middle Ages posed the problem of the glorious surface and what lies within.

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<sup>55</sup> Hurtig 82-3, 106-8 and Plates 79-82, 84, 86, 152, 154-71.

<sup>56</sup> See Alexander, ed., *Age of Chivalry* 479-81; Binski 97, 147; for the ceremonial reinterment in Bisham Priory, tomb and achievements of the Earl of Salisbury (d.1460), see Payne 187-8. For another later ceremonial helmet, see the "Flodden Helm" (c.1513) at Framlingham Church, Suffolk.

<sup>57</sup> *Pace* Binski 148.

<sup>58</sup> See Keen (Figure 29); Pastoureau, *Armorial* (Figure 31); *Une histoire symbolique* (Figures 18-21); *L'Art héraldique* (Figures 29, 34, 50, 53, 56, 72, 80, 127, 129).

<sup>59</sup> "Heraldry" in Hourihane, gen. ed., *Grove Encyclopedia* vol. 3 pp. 302-21 (315).



Figure 10: *Memorial Shield of Jacob Ortlieb*, German, c. 1475; gessoed, painted, and partially silvered wood, iron, leather, rope. Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2007-52-1. Reproduced by kind permission.

#### IV

Medieval French and English Arthurian romance is pervaded by attitudes towards bodies, equipment, identity and interiority implied by these materials. Romance writing does not contain the degree of heraldic elaboration that we have been seeing – indeed, it often cultivates a kind of heraldic minimalism. What it does prioritise is the business of naming, the development of reputation, the acquisition of armorial insignia, the changing of shields, the wearing of penons, the making of



tombs and memorials, and, in general, the fetishisation of all these phenomena in relation to knightly identity.<sup>60</sup> Crane is right that this is a world in which identity is understood as crucially social and in many ways dependent on formal, public recognition and admiration within the court. But there is also often a “worshipful” dimension to this preoccupation with chivalric identity, manifested in its various external forms and accoutrements. One example of the very special devotion accorded to Sir Lancelot, for example, occurs at a point in the *Lancelot-Grail* when Lancelot has disappeared and Galehaut (the knight who loves him more than any other) arrives at a castle courtyard in which ladies and knights are dancing round a pole from which Lancelot’s battered shield is hanging: “every time the knights or ladies came to face it, they would bow before it as before a holy relic. For a long time Galehaut watched how they were honouring the shield . . .” (Lacy, gen. ed. 2.326).<sup>61</sup> Elsewhere in the *Mort Artu*, Lancelot’s shield has been hung by a silver chain in the Cathedral at Camelot, where it is again “honoured as if it had been a holy relic” (Frappier, ed. §121, my translation).<sup>62</sup> This is one idolatrous extreme of the diverse theatrics of chivalric identity and its public acknowledgement that pervade Arthurian romance; but it makes very clear that these theatrics do indeed draw on attitudes to the body and its objects that are at least partly shaped by contemporary theories and iconographies of the idol.

The counterpart to this preoccupation with outward appearance in Arthurian romance is a sustained interest in the imagined inner life of its protagonists – sometimes explicitly analysed, but in many texts implied, or even negatively posited, in the form of a pointed textual silence or lacuna. A good number of twelfth-century verse romances contain detailed psychologising passages and psychosomachean episodes of mental “dialogue,” in which the knight is revealed to be in some way at odds or in tension with himself or his social group. Thirteenth-century French prose Arthurian romance cuts back somewhat on these;<sup>63</sup> nevertheless it still provides extensive information as to the thoughts and feelings of its protagonists, often working hard to naturalise or smooth out (though

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<sup>60</sup> On Arthurian heraldry, see Pastoureau, *Armorial*; for historical families who took Arthurian arms, see *ibid.* 22; and Crane 110 and note. On tombs and effigies in romance, see Camille, *Gothic Idol* 251; Kay 232–41. Arguing that the revival of tournaments under Edward IV may have influenced Malory, see Barber.

<sup>61</sup> For the French, Sommer, ed., *Vulgate Version* 4.144.

<sup>62</sup> On this and worship of Lancelot himself, see Kaeuper 54–5; for other examples of shield fetishism, see Malory, ed. Shepherd 486, 607.

<sup>63</sup> See Lambert 93, 103.



not to remove) the extreme psychological contrasts, contradictions and tensions that remain the *métier* of Arthurian romance. Malory, as we will see, takes this process further, omitting and compressing psychological material to intensify the enigma of psychological life. Nevertheless what all these texts share is a preoccupation with the interplay of apprehensible exterior and hidden interior, of seeing and not seeing, of readable and unreadable surfaces, in the exploration of chivalric identity. This preoccupation is in my view remarkably reminiscent of the discourse of the idol.

Arthurian romance is premised on the idea that the knight is not easily knowable. This is an imaginary world in which great store is set on the chivalric and military proof of distinctive identity and yet the terms for such self-identification remain highly delimited. If romance is in general interested in the “problem of signs and their interpretation” (Bruckner 4), one of the most puzzling signs is the knight himself – often puzzling, it seems, even to himself. One of the most obvious ways in which Arthurian romance formally acknowledges the opacity of the knight is in the structuring notion of *aventure*, an acceptance of “chance,” a going into the unknown in which proving oneself and self-discovery turn out to be the same thing.<sup>64</sup> If the terms which *aventure* sets for self-knowledge usually remain resolutely externalised, they nevertheless implicitly raise questions about what protagonists might feel about the outcomes. What is more, this is a restless world in which there is no end to such self-proving/discovery – in which even the meaning of success is scarcely clear. A common version of such *aventure* is the knight who travels incognito. Crane says that the purpose of adventuring unknown is “to establish or revise the perception of others concerning the disguised knight’s merits” (132); in line with her emphasis on social judgement, she argues that going incognito is “a peculiar kind of self-dramatization that invites rather than resists public scrutiny” (125). Indeed, it “is not significantly self-concealing . . . but the reverse” (132). But going unknown is also a way of courting risk and unpredictability. Indeed, chivalric incognito insistently confronts the reader with the romance question of “what is inside,” repeatedly posing telling and even painful questions about knightly motivation, desire, hubris, anger, humility or foolishness. And so, like the idol, the ambiguous insignia of the knight, his hidden colours and his frequent wearing of others’ armour

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<sup>64</sup> *The Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, “aventure,” n, “event,” “happening,” “destiny,” “fortune,” “marvel,” “accident,” *Middle English Dictionary*, “aventure,” n, has the same meanings plus the distinct category 4: “venture,” “a knightly quest.”

are also all ways of pointing to a preoccupation, not with the knight's lack of inner life, but with its puzzling possibility.

This is particularly the case in Malory's laconic English *Morte Darthur*, which will provide my two test cases here. Malory famously compresses and pares away a huge amount of the narrative and descriptive detail of his sources (predominantly, though not exclusively, the French prose Arthurian romances), preferring action and dialogue over setting and description. In the words of Mark Lambert, Malory is original "not by inventing, but by intensifying; and usually he intensifies by cutting rather than by adding" (68). The result, as Elizabeth Edwards has shown, is a narrative founded in apparent contingency and doubt, whose sign system is marked by systematic "trepidation" (138).<sup>65</sup> Malory also cuts much of the personal and psychological information to be found in his sources, removing all sorts of particularising features, which Lambert suggests Malory would have found "trivial:" (92-3); there is, Lambert says, "no Lancelotian turn of phrase, there are only knightly turns of phrase" (45).<sup>66</sup> And yet while Lambert may be right that "we are not invited to share [Lancelot's] private thoughts," I do not think he is correct that "we are not encouraged to suppose that he has any" (97).<sup>67</sup> On the contrary, what I shall be arguing is that here, once again, by cutting information and detail Malory actually often increases the psychological puzzles that he poses, making us ask with renewed intensity what is going on in the heads of his armoured men.

Two exemplary passages will have to form the basis of my evidence. The first is a tournament scene. Sir Lamorak, a knight who is under threat from the vengeful Gawain brothers because he loves their mother, enters in disguise. He is not a complete surprise at this moment, because we have seen him a few pages before jousting successfully against the odds as "the knyght wyth the rede shyld" (361)<sup>68</sup> and in conversation with the cowardly King Mark of Cornwall. Nevertheless now he is disguised from us as well as from several of the observers within the text. As he fights he reveals his great prowess in his deeds, and his disguise slips – but only partly:

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<sup>65</sup> See also Lambert 56-123, McCarthy 85-6 and Cooper 197.

<sup>66</sup> Also Lambert 92-123; see also Rumble 147-8; McCarthy 91-5; Cooper 185.

<sup>67</sup> See also Lambert 65, 109. Edwards is not so categorical, though for her too scepticism about the adultery of Guenevere is in the *Morte* "a matter of the psyche of the text rather than the psyche of the king" (133); I do not think that we have to choose.

<sup>68</sup> Malory cited from Shepherd's edition throughout. Here names are in italics to reflect the red rubrication of all names in the famous "Winchester Manuscript" base text.

Ryght so was Kynge *Arthure* ware of a knyght and two squyers that com oute of a foreystis syde wyth a covyrd shyld of lethir. Than he cam in slyly, and hurled here and there; and anone with one speare he had smyttyn downe two knyghtes of the Rounde Table. And so wyth his hurtelynge he loste the coverynge of his shyld; than was the Kynge and all ware that he bare a rede shyld. "A, Jesu," seyde Kynge *Arthure*, "se where rydyth a strong knyght – he wyth the rede shyld!" And there was a noyse and a grete cry: "Beware the knyght with the rede shyld!" (365).

In a world where public acknowledgment, especially from the king, is part of the pleasure of winning, we here see Lamorak both acknowledged and yet unknown, with the exception of the few for whom it is a private pleasure to know exactly who he is. In a nice dramatic irony, the still partly disguised and unknown Lamorak goes on to unseat his enemies, three of the Gawain brothers. Unwittingly, King Arthur compounds the irony: "How now?" seyde the Kynge to Sir *Gawayne*, 'methynkyth ye have a falle! Well were me and [if] I knew what knyght he were with the rede shyld'" (365). But now for those who know the knight's identity comes the pleasure of toying with King Arthur; Sir Dynadan smirkingly announces that he has the knowledge, but won't tell; but then Sir Tristram graciously solves the mystery: "I know hym well inowghe," seyed Sir *Dynadan*, 'but as at this tyme ye shall nat know his name.' 'Be my hede,' seyde Sir *Trystram*, 'he justyth better than Sir *Palamydes* – and yf ye lyst to know, his name is Sir *Lameroke de Galys*'" (365). Sir Lamorak then takes down twenty other knights, including Sir Gawain himself, and then tries to slip away into the woods, but the king and others follow him and bring him back to the court for a celebration.

With remarkable succinctness, this scene circles round the issue of not knowing and knowing Sir Lamorak, hiding and revealing him, teasing the reader as much as Dynadan does King Arthur. Arthur, Dynadan and Trystram of course each have different degrees of knowledge and differing emotional engagements with what they know. Here too the opposition between Lamorak and the Gawain brothers is intensified by the irony of Arthur's unwitting intervention, which once again foregrounds the protagonists' different levels of knowledge and investment in the scene – if Arthur and Gawain are at different points unaware of who Lamorak is, it means different things to them. At the same time, although nothing is said about what Lamorak thinks, the scene surely demands that we try to imagine it. Humour is also a central component of this compressed scene with its sharp focus on the characters' discrepant understandings and affective engagements with the knight who turns out to be Lamorak. At the same time, these variable epistemologi-



cal and emotional relations are underpinned by Malory's distinctive modes of narrative: his combination of events that seem to be intended and others that seem to occur by chance (often sharpened with telling adverbs), his juxtaposition of actions ongoing and others that have suddenly just happened, his mixing of active verbs and impersonalised narration ("Than he cam in slyly, and hurled here and there; and anone with one speare he had smyttyn downe two knyghtes," "And there was a noyse and a grete cry . . ." [365]).

The features of the passage that I want to foreground, then, are already apparent. But comparison with Malory's sources (or as close as we can get to them) in the *Tristan en prose* throws them into contour even more sharply.<sup>69</sup> Here the knight also emerges out of the woods, but the narrator immediately comments: "Et se aucuns me demandoit ki li chevaliers estoit, je diroie que ce estoit Lamorat de Gales" ("and if anyone asked me who this knight was, I would say that it was Lamorat de Gales" 4.211). From the outset we know for sure who the knight is. The narrator then explains at some length that Lamorat has come to see King Mark at Arthur's court, not because he wants to see King Mark for himself, but because he wants to see him at the mercy of King Arthur and Tristan. The narrator tells us how Lamorat looks around and says to himself he has come at a good moment; determined to show that he is not as exhausted as many others, he checks his horse, "removes from his shield a cloth with which it was covered" ("fait son escu decouvrir d'une houche dont il estoit couvers" 4.212) and rides out at walking pace, ("le petit pas" 4.212). In the French, even before Lamorat has started fighting, the king asks who the knight is, and Dynadan, "who recognised him from the shield" ("ki le reconnut a l'escu," here green, 4.212), announces that he is a good knight; however, as in the English – though now in one of two such refusals – Dynadan will not say who he is: "Tant vous en di ore" ("that's all I will tell you for now" 4.212). In the French text the opponency of the jousts is also rather more muted; Lamorat fights with two knights, one unnamed and the other Agravain, a Gawain family member ("Et se aucuns me demandoit qui li chevaliers estoit, je diré que ce estoit Agrevains" 4.212); and in this text Arthur does not address the fighters directly at all. In the French, in other words, this scene takes place at a much more leisurely pace. Its

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<sup>69</sup> This text exists in various forms in upward of 80 manuscripts, none thought to be the one that Malory used; see Malory, ed. Field 2.245-53. The two versions I have used match each other pretty closely at this point, though the 1489 printed version is more compressed: Ménard, gen. ed., *Tristan en prose* 4.211-17; and the early printed edition, Pickford, Introd., *Tristan 1489* fols ggvii r-v. I will cite from the Ménard edition.

whole ethos is also slightly more disengaged, and, although fighting is still at its centre, it is also much more about the men observing and conversing from the sidelines. Indeed, in this version even Tristan first refrains from telling Arthur who Lamorat is, and when he does, Arthur does not believe him – leading to a further argument about whether this is Lamorat or Palamidés!

The French narrative, then, is detailed, informative, sometimes humorous and thick with psychological observation and explanations; nevertheless, despite its discursive style, it exhibits many of the same preoccupations as Malory. But it also will be apparent that Malory's distinctive techniques of compression mean that his characters' interactions and words are juxtaposed with a very distinctive abruptness, comedy and intensity. Insofar as Malory poses the question of what goes on in the head of the knight, it is not just that the evidence is much reduced; it is also rawer, more unmediated and more sharply contrastive; mingling sometimes surprising combinations of action and response, its opacities are, I suggest, both more apparent and much more intractable. Of course, this is only one scene in the life of Lamorak as Malory tells it: later Lamorak is to die at the hands of the Gawain brothers, though in *Morte Darthur* (unlike in the *Tristan en prose*) we never see it, only hear about it. Retrospectively, then, we discover that this scene was one of a sequence in which Malory's Lamorak "shows" himself before vanishing back into the Arthurian world of adventure.

My second example illustrates the psychological dramas that arise from going unknown and the effects of inner complexity that are created by the highly physical encounters of armoured bodies. It involves Sir Trystram, who often travels unknown, and his tragic double, Sir Palomydes, who also loves Isode and endlessly seeks to fight with Trystram because of it; but he never can beat him. It is Palomydes' *aventure* always to come second. In this scene Trystram, who is carrying "a blacke shyld with none other remembraunce [insignia]" (316), hears of a knight by a well, who has just loosed himself from the bands tying him to a tree and is rushing around "cryng as he had bene woode [mad]" (319). When Trystram goes to the well, he hears the knight name himself as Palomydes; he watches him rage and inadvertently drop his sword into the well –

... and at the laste, for pure sorow, he ran into that fountayne and sought aftir hys swerde. Than Sir *Trystram* saw that and ran uppon Sir *Palomydes* and hylde him in hys armys faste. "What art thou," seyde Sir *Palomydes*, "that holdith me so?" "I am a man of thys foreyste that wold the none harme."

"Alas," seyde Sir *Palomydes*, "I may never wyn worship where Sir *Trystram* ys; for ever where he ys and I be, there gete I no worship . . ." (319).

Here, then, armour makes it possible for *Palomydes* both to know and not to know his closest competitor, despite the fact that he is now holding him in his arms.<sup>70</sup> "Going unknown" thus enables *Trystram* to learn something about *Palomydes*, but also about himself; and of course both he and the text are entirely silent about what he thinks at this point. He just asks *Palomydes* what he would do if he had *Trystram* in his power: "I wolde fyght with hym," said Sir *Palomydes*, "and ease my harte uppon hym – and yet, to say the sothe, Sir *Trystram* ys the jantylyste knyght in thys worlde lyvyng" (320).

This extraordinary compression is typical of Malory, and its effect is one of tight and painful paradox, but one that is seen vividly embodied in two figures – and two imagined interiors – as close as they can be, one in the arms of the other. It is also typical of Malory not to say anything more. The reader is left to hypothesise the conflicted feelings that pass through them – *Palomydes*, as he acknowledges the contradiction of what he feels, and *Trystram*, as he hears it.

The French is much more expansive and psychologically informative.<sup>71</sup> *Tristan* goes to find *Palamidés*, purposefully sends his squire back and hides behind a tree to listen to *Palamidés*' lament; this lament is an altogether longer item that involves a discussion about whether God or *Tristan* is responsible for *Palamidés*' misfortune (it turns out to be the latter). While searching wildly for his sword *Palamidés* finds *Tristan*, who explains that he was listening; *Tristan* asks who this "Tristan" can be – an active deception he sustains over the rest of this part of their encounter. It is in response to this question that *Palamidés* responds "Certes . . . il n'est mie vallés, ains est sans faille li miudres cevaliers du monde; et par maintes fois ai je sa bonté veüe et esprouvee" ("Certainly . . . he is no page, indeed, he is without doubt the best knight in the world; and many times I have seen and experienced his goodness," 2.308). *Palamidés* then goes on to explain that *Tristan*'s goodness kills

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<sup>70</sup> As remarked in the subsequent scene in the French text when he is entertained by *Trystram* but unbeknownst to him: "*Palamidés* . . . mout regarde volentiers monsieur *Tristan*, que il n'avoit veü se armé non . . . reconnoistre ne le puet, car mesure *Tristans* avoit auques le visage debatü et defoulé des caus k'il avoit receüs en l'assamblee . . ." (Ménard, ed., *Tristan en prose* 2.312). Compare Malory's "but in no wyse Sir *Trystram* myght nat be knowyn with Sir *Palomydes*" (320).

<sup>71</sup> Ménard, ed., *Tristan en prose* 2.306-11; see also Pickford, Intro., *Tristan 1489* fols yviii-zii<sup>r</sup>.



him (Palamidés) and asks if his unnamed interlocutor knows where Tristan's pavilion is; when Tristan asks why he wants to know, Palamidés finally explains: "Pour ce . . . que volentiers iroie cele part et feroie tant en aucune maniere que je de Tristan me vengeroie: u je le metrai du tout a mort u il m'ocirra" ("because I would go there willingly and act in such a way that I would avenge myself on Tristan: either I will put him completely to death or he will kill me" 2.309). Of course in the French Palamidés also has contradictory views and feelings about Tristan. The main difference is that the French text works harder to naturalise, or to make a kind of surface sense out of, the dynamics of his passions, allowing them to emerge over a series of verbal exchanges and psychological progressions. It is precisely this attempt to make sense of his characters' psychology that Malory avoids. Instead, he allows Trystram swiftly to interject his question "what wolde ye do . . . and ye had sir *Trystram*?" Even this question, of course, brings the focus back onto Trystram: what is he thinking and feeling as he hears the answer? Palomydes' in fact paradoxical reply compresses and reverses his answers to two separate questions in the French text (one about why he seeks Tristan, and the other about who Tristan is, at 2.309 and 308). It sets all his internal contradictions startlingly side by side: "I wolde fyght with hym,' said Sir *Palomydes*, 'and ease my harte uppon hym – and yet, to say the sothe, Sir *Trystram* ys the jantylyste knyght in thys worlde lyvyng" (319).

In the following sections, the French (and the English) text tells how, unknown to Palamidés, Tristan hosts him for the night before they all return to the tournament on the next day, where once again Tristan excels. At some point in the French text, he and Palamidés, both on foot, encounter each other. Tristan runs to his enemy "et li donne desus le hiaume un si grant caup com il puet amener d'en haut a la force de ses bras, et puis li dist: 'Palamidés, or tenés ceste: ce est Tristrans, vostre amis chiers, qui si grans caus vous set donner!'" ("and gives him on the helmet as great a blow as he can bring down from on high with the strength of his arms, and then he says: 'Palamidés, now take this: this is Tristan, your dear friend, who is able to give you such a great blow!'" 2.325). To this Palamidés responds with the cry "Tristan!" and a tirade of aggression. Much later, when Tristan has won the day (at one point he lifts Palamidés off his horse and dumps him on the ground), he retires wounded, but is followed by Palamidés and Gaheriet. Predictably, he unhorses both of them, and after a jocular exchange with Dynadans, the two depart, leaving "Palamidés et Gaheriés gisant, ki encore n'avoient pooir d'aus relever, tant durement estoient estourdi" ("Pala-

midés and Gaheriés lying, so stunned that they did not have the power to get back up” 2.338-9).<sup>72</sup>

In Malory much of this is compressed; but most importantly for my purposes, the central scene is more melodramatic and psychologically more complex. In the course of a brief narration of the tournament, Trystram and Palomydes meet in armoured combat once again, though still Palomydes does not know who Trystram is. Trystram knocks his opponent off his horse and, as they fight on foot, he dramatically asserts himself over him, with not one but three blows. He also reveals himself, but now much more obliquely and partially (can Palomydes even now be sure who he is?), and again three times over. The effect is devastating. “And at the last Sir *Trystram* smote Sir *Palomydes* uppon the helme three myghty strokes – and at every stroke that he gaff he seyde, ‘Have thys for Sir *Trystramys* sake!’ And with that Sir Palomydes felle to the erthe grovelynge” (321). As in the French, this is not the end of the scene; the two are soon re-horsed and exchanging blows, and later on Trystram unceremoniously unhorses both Palomydes and Gaherys. But later, as the court recalls the day’s deeds, Arthur again remembers this symbolic moment when Trystram “smote Sir *Palomydes* uppon the helme thryse . . . and also he seyde ‘here ys a stroke for Sir *Trystram*’ – and thus he seyde thryse” (323). Through Arthur, Malory seems to acknowledge the potency of this particular encounter between Trystram and Palomydes.

It is armour, a visor and a black shield that allow Trystram to make his way across the battlefield unknown to the man who cares about him perhaps more strongly than anyone else. At this point, Trystram can choose when, how and the degree to which he identifies himself to Palomydes, and he does so in a manner to cause maximum surprise, shock and humiliation. Although that multivalent word *grovelynge* gives us some clue as to what is going on inside Palomydes, it is scarcely full information. Is he *grovelynge* from the blow or from grief? Is this a symbolic submission or the involuntary fall of an idol? Of course we don’t know much about what Trystram feels at this moment either. Like the idol, both Trystram and Palomydes are at this point very hard to read. My point, then, is not just that these are two of the idols of the Arthurian world – though they may be. My point is that there is something idol-like about the intractable unreadability of these armoured forms, precisely because we also intuit something of the raw sentience within.

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<sup>72</sup> At the equivalent point in Pickford, Intro., *Tristan 1489* fol. zvi<sup>r</sup>, however, the text reads only that they “laissent illec pallamedes et gaheriet.”

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