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THE CODIFICATION OF HERALDRY IN MALORY'S *LE MORTE DARTHUR*

Sarah Brazil

This article will explore literary uses of heraldry, particularly in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte DARTHUR*, and demonstrate that the normative functions of heraldry are often suspended or moulded to suit the literary circumstances at hand.¹ Heraldry is crucial to the landscape of medieval Arthurian literature, but its use often bears little resemblance to historically verifiable practices. Rules can be insisted on as common procedure when this is definitely not the case, basic conventions can be breached, while heraldic devices can become disproportionately significant features of a character and plot. Throughout this article I will present instances of such heraldic appropriation, with a particular focus on the occasions when heraldic devices are made significant to the point of catastrophe, namely in Malory's 'Balyn le Sauvage'.

One of the central arguments of this article is that such deviations from historically recognisable practices, which would have been known by many contemporary readers, are possible because literature is not bound to obey and replicate social codifications, that 'literature is not a mirror that reflects the features of humanity'.² Indeed, as Guillemette Bolens posits, literature has the opportunity to manipulate the established and recognisable framework of social conventions for its own purposes. Bolens writes, 'Any work of art is liable to reinvent in its own terms the multiple parameters and paradigms (perceptual and cognitive, sociocultural, anthropological, and historical) that intersect in the event of its creation'.³ The critic further explores the dynamics of the literary text by arguing that 'literature elicits an interplay' between these paradigms.⁴ Drawing on Wolfgang Iser's *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, Bolens explains that

... this interplay activates unforeseen possibilities, as literature, out of principal, transgresses the givens of reality as well as discursive, cognitive, social, and cultural frames of reference. Literary narratives "overstep given boundaries," (Iser) inasmuch as they do not explain but rather disrupt, decompose, and recompose them, creating new configurations – configurations that are unpredictable because they are fictional, binding codifications to the imaginary and thus continually signalling the unlimited nature of human possibilities.⁵

Given that the society Malory wrote within was one where heraldry still played a

¹ All quotations and book titles are taken from *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, ed. Eugène Vinaver (2nd edn., 3 vols., Oxford 1967).

² Guillemette Bolens, *The Style of Gestures: Embodiment and cognition in literary narrative* (Baltimore 2012), p. 168. ³ Ibid. ⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bolens, p. 168. Wolfgang Iser, 'What is literary anthropology?' in *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting literary anthropology* (Baltimore 1993), pp. 171, 173-7.

significant role, it is all the more apparent that literature can transform systems which are recognisable to readers and that such transformations are accepted as part of the fictional process.

Heraldry is present in medieval Arthurian literature from a very early stage, and critics have remarked that twelfth-century French writers generally adhere to basic rules of heraldry, e.g. that colour was never place upon colour. Gerard Brault notes, however, that French Arthurian literature is not concerned with ascribing a fixed heraldic charge to a character, and in general does not point to familial ties through insignia, thus ignoring two fundamental functions that heraldry fulfilled. He names Benoît's non-Arthurian *Roman de Troie* (1160-1170) as an exception in this regard, as it is consistent with both its connection of arms to specific characters and its linking of the brothers Hector, Troilus and Paris through their heraldic devices.⁶

French Arthurian literature also makes frequent use of plain arms, where a knight carries a shield devoid of any charge or second layer of tincture. This practice, Brault points out, is not against any heraldic regulation, but it is one that few historical persons actually used, and the ones who did were likely to have copied it from the literary model. Brault further outlines two main reasons for the use of plain arms, the first being for the purpose of disguise as frequently used by Chretien de Troyes (c. 1135-1183), the second being attributed to so called 'unproven' knights (*chevaliers nouveaux*) in thirteenth century literature,⁷ which again is not a heraldic convention. Other uses of heraldry include the ascription of historically notable arms, such as that of King Richard I, *gules two leopards or crowned argent*, to fictitious kings,⁸ presumably in an attempt to link the fictional monarch to the historical one.

As briefly evidenced above, Arthurian texts employ heraldry for their own literary purposes, manipulating and ignoring the conventional parameters that such a system dictated. Indeed, Malory adopts some of the same literary conventions in his English work, and even condenses both uses of the plain shield in one particular instance. When Sir Launcelot lodges with Sir Bernard of Astolot in the book of 'Sir Launcelot and Quene Guinevere', he borrows a plain shield from a newly dubbed knight, thus disguising himself through the novice's shield. The inexperience of the knight whose shield Launcelot borrows is made evident by Sir Bernard's response to his request to carry a shield that will not be recognised:

Sir, wyte you well I have two sunnes that were but late made knyghtes. And the eldist hyght sir Tirry, and he was hurte that same day he was made knyghte, and he may nat ryde; and hys shyld ye shalle have, for that ys nat knowyn, I dare sey, but here and in no place else.⁹

⁶ Gerard J. Brault, *Early Blazon: Heraldic terminology in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with special reference to Arthurian heraldry* (2nd edn., Woodbridge 1997), p. 18.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 29f. Brault attributes this to the bearing of plain red arms by Chretien's Perceval, who was regarded as 'simple-minded before his tutoring'.

⁸ Ibid., p. 21. *Durmart le Galois*, composed in the early years of the thirteenth century.

⁹ *Works* vol. 2, xviii 8, pp. 1067. 'Sir, be assured that I have two sons who were recently knighted, and the eldest is called Sir Tirry; and he was hurt the same day that he was knighted, so he may not ride, and you shall have his shield, for I dare say it is not known anywhere but here, and nowhere else'.

As the younger brother, Sir Lavayne, and Sir Launcelot prepare themselves to travel to the tournament of Astolat they are described as carrying 'whyght shyldis'. Such a practice is blatantly against fifteenth century heraldic conventions, just as it was when utilised by Chretien in the twelfth century, but in this fictional space the text can insist on the existence of its own heraldic practices. Elsewhere, the so-called 'Quenys Knyghtes', who are described as being predominantly 'yonge men that wolde have worshyp' – young men who wanted to win honour – also carry plain white shields and 'never in no batayle, turnement nother justys they bare none of hem no maner of knowlecchyng of their owne armys'.¹⁰ The shields are here used to subsume the individual identity of the knight into the group of knights who defend Guinevere, and the insistence that they never carry their personal device precisely in the places where they are most visible once again contradicts historical practice.

But apart from borrowing such literary conventions, Malory also employs heraldry as a primary mechanism of communication and identification within *Le Morte Darthur*. In the book of 'Sir Tristrams de Lyones' Sir Uwain recognises Sir Gaheris by his shield and consequently refuses to fight his fellow knight of the Round Table, as he has sworn an oath not to do so: 'And, pardé, sir Gaherys, ye know me well inow by my shyld, and so do I know you by youre shyld'.¹¹ In the same book, Palomydes is known to all by his 'endented shield': 'So with that cam in sir Palomydes, and he made grete worke, for by hys endented shyld he was well knowyn',¹² and particular devices are repeatedly referred to as the sole means by which knights' recognise one another.¹³

Throughout the literary landscape of the *Morte*, heraldic devices are also proffered as the means through which a knight can obscure identity, with the shield-switching Sir Launcelot being the prime exponent of this.¹⁴ When fighting in a tournament for King Bagdemagus in order to honour an oath, Sir Launcelot disguises himself because he is fighting against his fellows, the knights of King Arthur. Launcelot here requests that the party use blank shields, again drawing on the French convention in order to disguise himself and his retinue effectively:

But, sir, ye shal sende unto me three knyghtes of youres suche as ye truste and loke that the three knyghtes have all whyght sheldis and no picture on their shyldis, and ye shall sende me another of the same sewte; and we four wyll oute of a lyttl wood in myddys

¹⁰ Ibid., vol. 3, xix 1, p. 1121. 'Never in no battle, tournament nor jousts did any of them bare any kind of indication of their own arms'.

¹¹ *Works*, vol. 2, ix 38. 'And by God, Sir Gaheris, you know me well enough by my shield, and I also know you by your shield'.

¹² Ibid., ix 33, p. 530. 'So with that in came Sir Palomydes, and did notable deeds, because by his indented shield he was recognised'.

¹³ Again in relation to Sir Palomydes, Sir Dynadan seeks him by his shield: "'What knight art ye?' seyde sir Palomydes. "Sir, I am a knyght arraunte as ye be, that have sought you longe by your shyld". Ibid., x 16, p. 595. ('What knight are you', said Sir Palomydes. 'Sir, I am a knight errant like you, that has long sought you by your shield'.)

¹⁴ For more on the topic of disguise see Jane Bliss, *Naming and Namelessness in Medieval Romance* (Cambridge 2008).

of bothe partyes com, and we shall falle on the frunte of oure enemys and greve hem that we may. And thus shall I not be knowyn what maner a knyght I am.¹⁵

In an episode later in his tale, Launcelot takes the shield of Sir Kay after rescuing the latter from an attack by three knights. As Sir Kay explains: “Now... I know welle that he woll greve som of the courte of kyng Arthure, for on hym knyghtes woll be bolde and deme that hit is I, and that woll begyle them. And bycause of his armoure and shyld I am sure I shall ryde in pease”.¹⁶ By switching shields, Launcelot takes on the weaker knight’s identity and as a consequence can win battles he would otherwise not have the opportunity to fight, thus reaffirming his physical supremacy and status as ‘best knight’. Even though the body of the knight can call in to question the validity of the identity that the device points to, it cannot override it. Some of the knights Launcelot encounters point out “Yondir knyght is nat sir Kay, for he is far bygger than he”.¹⁷ Such observations, however, cannot conclusively affirm identity, but merely question it. It is only after the actions of the knight initially thought to be Kay do not match what is expected that the heraldic device is viewed with suspicion.

The tale that most aptly demonstrates the more problematic uses of heraldry in *Le Morte Darthur* is that of ‘Balyn le Sauvage’, where the use and misuse of the heraldic device determines the fate of the eponymous ‘hero’. The character of Balyn will thus be analysed in relation to his use of his heraldic device and how this impinges on his already complex characterisation. Balyn’s use of sign systems and the perception of that use by others, or rather the gap that emerges between the two, becomes a crucial facet of the tale, and one that points forward ominously to future episodes and characters in the *Morte*. This furthermore invites an examination of how Malory constructs such systems, and the impact they have upon the narrative.

Balyn is an ambiguous character that is in many ways circumscribed by indeterminability. He is both loved and reviled by Arthur, praised and condemned by Merlin, and is consistently presented as the greatest knight both in prowess and virtue, only to die by unwittingly killing and being killed by his brother and dearest friend, Balan. He will protect Arthur from King Royns’ attack, but strike the dolorous stroke to King Pellam, simultaneously plunging three countries into ruin. Catherine Batt notes that ‘Balin is variously perpetrator and victim of breaches of safe conduct’,¹⁸ naming Balyn’s decapitation of the lady of the lake under the protection of Arthur and the invisible knight Garlon’s murdering of two knights under Balyn’s protection as the prime

¹⁵ *Works*, vol. 1, vi 6, p. 262. ‘But sir, you shall send three knights to me that you trust and see to it that the three knights have all-white shields with no picture on their shields, and you shall send me another of the same kind; and we four will come out of a little wood in the middle of both parties, and we shall rush towards our enemies on their front line and grieve them as much as we can. And thus it shall not be known which knight I am’.

¹⁶ *Works*, vol. 1, vi 11, p. 275. ‘Now, I know well that he will grieve some knights from the court of King Arthur, because knights will be daring against him and think that it is I, and that will trick them. And because of his armour and shield I am sure to ride in pease’.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, vi 12, p. 275.

¹⁸ Catherine Batt, *Malory’s ‘Morte D’Arthur’: Remaking Arthurian tradition* (Basingstoke 2002), p. 60.

examples of another oppositional facet of his character. He is described in battle with his brother Balan as being 'angels – other [or] devilles', blessed or demonic, again placing him between two divergent extremes in what becomes an almost unreadable textual position.¹⁹

Elizabeth Edwards remarks that Balyn is 'hardly a figure at all'²⁰ and when positing Malory's tale against its source, the *Suite de Merlin*, the critic observes that Malory's 'version is characterised by omissions of one kind or another'.²¹ And yet in spite of the contradictory or absent details, Edwards argues that a 'central "message" of "Balin" [is] that people, like events, are vitally, yet mysteriously, connected to each other'.²² Batt furthermore argues that 'Balin acts out of the conflicted condition that constitutes chivalric identity',²³ and situates him at the centre of a system that is constructed by contradictory values. Indeed, Balyn appears to be the paramount example of what it means to be the best and the worst knight, yet his actions never decisively align him to either category. In being both best and worst simultaneously, the text seems to push to the limit the attributes that define a knight, and by the extreme example of Balyn points to the conflicting values built into the chivalric identity.

Balyn's conflicted identity is also discernable in his appearance, and specifically by the two incompatible perceptions of him presented through his body on the one hand and clothing on the other. In Balyn's introduction to the text, he has just been released from prison and enters Arthur's court, where a damsel is searching for the most virtuous and excellent knight to relieve her of a sword girded to her. Balyn does not initially put himself forward, the text explaining that 'he was poore and poorly arayed [dressed]'.²⁴ When all fail, however, Balyn finally presents himself. He is assessed on contradictory terms, clearly delineated by the text: 'Thys damesell than behelde thys poure knyght and saw he was a lykly man; but for hys poure araymente she thought he sholde nat be of no worship withoute vylony or trechory'.²⁵ The use of the coordinating conjunction 'but' perfectly delineates the text's lack of unity on Balyn's character. While on one side he is 'lykly,' defined by the *Middle English Dictionary* as 'Apparently or obviously able, apt, inclined; fine looking, good-looking; suitable, appropriate', the other half of the clause sees his 'poure arayment' as challenging this.²⁶ While body points to nobility and excellence, clothing undermines this, thus cancelling out initial perceptions. His clothing, which should signal nobility, martial supremacy and social status, instead points to their absence, and the emphatic reliance on fabrics as a capable signifier of the body beneath determines judgment in this instance.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 50.

²⁰ Elizabeth Edwards, *The Genesis of Narrative in Malory's Morte Darthur* (Cambridge 2001), p. 26.

²¹ Ibid., p. 24.

²² Ibid., p. 40.

²³ Batt, p. 62.

²⁴ *Works*, vol. 1, ii 2, p. 63.

²⁵ Ibid. 'This damsel then looked upon this poor knight, and saw that he was a fine looking man: but because of his poor clothing she thought he could not possess honour and be without villainy and treachery'.

²⁶ s.v. 'lykly' (adj.), (2. a, b, d): <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>.

The resolution of this situation, however, sees Balyn succeeding where all others have failed. The best of the court, including Arthur himself, have not managed to achieve the sword, yet in paradoxical fashion, it is Balyn, the poor knight freshly released from prison, who proves he has the moral and martial excellence to succeed. He does so, moreover, by eloquently arguing that clothing cannot possibly connote such virtues, and that ‘worship [honour] and hardynesse [courage] ys nat in araymente [clothing]’ but is ‘hyd within a mannes person’ (hidden within a man’s body) thus pointing to the inherent gap that exists between the sign and what is signified.²⁷ It is another paradox, however, that the very knight who presents such a subtle understanding of what philosopher Giorgio Agamben terms the Saussurian ‘abyss’ that inherently exists between the signifier and signified, will fail to account for the signifying capacity of his own shield.²⁸

To be sure, Malory’s heraldic devices in ‘Balyn le Sauvage’ are so fundamental to the identification of the character that it seems to push this semiotic medium to its limits. As initially witnessed when the brothers Balyn and Balan meet for the first time in the tale, the only way they recognise each other is by their coat of arms: ‘And than was he ware *by hys armys* that there com rydyng hys brothir Balan. And whan they were mette they put of hyr helmys and kyssed togydirs and wepte for joy and pité’ (my emphasis).²⁹ The contingency of the identification process for knights is here pointed to, and will return later in the tale. As in many other occasions of knights meeting, the sign is the only means of communication used. Speech is entirely absent, and there is no removal of helm until recognition is secured. By pointing to the heraldic device as being the only method through which brother might know brother, the burden on the sign to correctly denote the body which bears it is a heavy one.

The extent to which Malory does burden the capacity of the sign is pointed to when Balyn wilfully switches his shield before a *pas d’armes* for one that is ‘byggar’ than his, with the knight who lends it to him positing that Balyn’s is ‘not good’. He is chastised for this action by an anonymous lady, who explains his perilous condition: “‘O knyght Balyn, why have ye lefte your owne sheld? Allas! ye have put yourself in grete daunger, for by your sheld ye shold have ben knowen”’.³⁰ Without his own shield, Balyn enters the contest effectively without an identity. Moreover, as he did not relinquish his shield for the deliberate purpose of disguise, a practice used with great success by knights such as Launcelot and Tristram, Balyn instead loses control over how he is perceived. His brother Balan, as the text explicates, half recognises Balyn by the two swords he carries (Balyn’s other name in the tale is the Knight with Two Swords), but the absence of his heraldic insignia impedes full identification:

²⁷ *Works*, vol. 1, ii 2, p. 63.

²⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and phantasm in Western culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis 1993), p. 139.

²⁹ *Works*, vol. 1, ii 6, p. 70. ‘And then he knew *by his coat of arms* that it was his brother Balan who was riding. And when they came together they took off their helms and kissed each other for joy and sorrow’.

³⁰ *Works*, vol. 1, ii 17, p. 88. ‘O knight Balyn, why have you given up your own shield? Alas, you have put yourself in great danger, because you should have been known by your shield’.

'Whan this knyghte in the reed beheld Balyn hym thought it shold be his broder Balen by cause of his two swerdys, but by cause he knewe not his sheld he demed it was nat he'.³¹ Again, the coordinating conjunction 'but' points to the separation of that which can and cannot signify, with the shield in this instance being that which can. When the sign that should signal his bodily presence is absent, Balyn is unknowable, becoming lost in the physical and semiotic gap that lies between body and coat of arms. It is in this textual detail that Malory has reversed the signifying capacity of the sign, and where clothing previously could not connote Balyn's worth and thus was emptied of its signifying capacity, now his heraldic insignia becomes overburdened with exactly that. His failure to recognise the importance of bearing his own coat of arms, which the text effectively equates to his body, results in the annihilation of it. Once the only device which can speak for a knight's identity is disposed of, the lady's warning of the consequential 'unknowability' of Balyn's body comes to pass. It is the final paradox of a character plagued by such a condition that he is killed because he is equated with a sign - a process which he had already objected to as being arbitrary and inherently problematic.

Balyn's demise, which comes at the hand of a misplaced sign, is a chilling indictment of a semiotic system where values are capable of becoming absolute. As Edwards remarks, 'Balyn le Sauvage' seems to point forward and connect to subsequent narrative events in the *Morte*,³² and the death of Gareth, which is also caused by an absent coat of arms, can only recall Balyn's. In the final book, the 'Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon', Sir Gareth is ordered to participate in the execution of Queen Guinevere after the affair between her and Sir Launcelot has been revealed. Sir Gareth, continually described as the knight who loves Sir Launcelot the most (and who deliberately sought out Sir Launcelot to knight him) protests at being present and does so by not wearing armour, weapons or any heraldic device.³³ When Launcelot rushes in to save Guinevere, he accidentally kills Gareth, in what Arthur later refers to as 'in the thyk prees', i.e. in the thick of combat.³⁴ The text insists that this act, as unbelievable to Gareth's brother Sir Gawain as it is to the reader, is committed because 'in very trouthe sir Launcelot saw them nat'.³⁵ Launcelot later, in a process that Mark Lambert terms 'confirmation' (where the repetition of a fact from different narratorial perspectives confirms its validity), also says 'I had nat seyne Sir Gareth'.³⁶

³¹ Ibid., ii 18, p. 89. 'When this knight in red saw Balyn, he thought it might be his brother Balyn because of his two swords, but because he did not know his shield he thought it was not him'.

³² Edwards, p. 28.

³³ Sir Gawain, when rebuking Sir Launcelot for the deed, says 'what cause haddist thou to sle [kill] my good brother Sir Gareth that loved the [you] more than me and all my kynne? ... Why slewest thou hym that loved the [you] so well?' *Works*, vol. 3, xx 11, p. 1189.

³⁴ *Works*, vol. 3, xx 10, p. 1185. Arthur also agrees that Launcelot 'knew them nat' (did not recognise them).

³⁵ Ibid., xx 8, p. 1178.

³⁶ *Works*, vol. 3, xx 11, p. 1189. Mark Lambert, *Style and Vision in "Le Morte Darthur"* (New Haven 1975), p. 8.

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Gareth is slain because Launcelot simply does not see him, as the separation of knight from the visual confirmation of his identity can signal nothing, and Gareth is consequently eliminated from the text.

Edwards notes that Gareth that is 'in a sense betrayed by the very elements that have elsewhere made him the pattern of chivalry', and as with Balyn, the designation of successful or catastrophic actions become dangerously interchangeable within this destabilised hermeneutic system.³⁷ But while Edwards argues that 'signs... are inessential, too empty of meaning', I have argued that it is the overburdening of the sign with meaning that has disrupted the normative chivalric events.³⁸ In a system where the sign is the only thing capable of designating a body's identity, Malory places the utmost pressure on the signifying capacity of the heraldic device, with terrible results. With the early example of Balyn, whose bizarrely portentous tale echoes through the *Morte*, there is an urgency placed upon the correct use of the sign.

In conclusion, this paper has investigated the various literary functions of heraldry in select Arthurian texts, with many of them having little relation to historical heraldic practices. The use of heraldry as a codified semiotic system, however, is one aspect that does have contact with heraldic conventions, and Malory's *Morte Darthur* in particular makes extensive use of the practice. The connection between body and device, furthermore, is established as being either arbitrary or fundamental, thus demonstrating the capacity of literature to both 'decompose' and 'recompose' codifications to suit its purpose. The seminal role that heraldry plays in Malory's text testifies to the centrality of the practice in late medieval England, with the imaginative possibilities as well as historically verifiable ones both present in the landscape of the text.

³⁷ Edwards, p. 53.

³⁸ Ibid.