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# Text-Bearing Warriors: Inscriptions on Weapons

I

Weapons are, as any dictionary entry will readily confirm, objects which can be used to inflict bodily harm or to defend oneself in conflict and combat. Certainly, this definition encompasses a rather large number of things that may potentially serve as an offensive or defensive weapon. The weaponry I will treat in this chapter, however, will be rather more limited since medieval knights, fashioned as they are by chivalric romances and *chansons de geste*, do not typically exhaust all such possibilities. This limitation is due to several reasons that have much more to do with the cultural imagination than with practical purposes and real-world requirements. And what is true for weapons in general is also true for inscriptions on weapons. The form and function of inscriptions are very much shaped by cultural concepts, by notions of heroism, for example, and by concepts of identity. Consequently, my discussion begins with a broader view of this cultural figuration before focussing more narrowly on several concrete script-bearing artefacts as case studies. Finally, I will provide a more detailed reading of *Perceval/Parzival* to show script-bearing weapons within a wider network of inscribed artefacts.

As I have just suggested, the choices knights have with regard to the weapons they employ are culturally predetermined. This selection assures the knight's status and restricts his behaviour. After all, chivalry obliges, at least according to courtly literature, that the knight must abide by a strict set of rules. Knightly etiquette, spelled out for example in Hartmann von Aue's *Iwein* (524–542), allows for jousting and sword-fighting, but certainly not for a bar fight. These rules of engagement work to contain the violence of the encounter—urging the winner, for instance, to spare a defeated opponent's life. Consequently, these rules construct a combatant's victory not only as a function of his physical prowess, but as a manifestation of his superior moral values, with both qualities reciprocally establishing his honour. Vernacular literatures of the Middle Ages promoted those norms and standards firmly and effectively—mostly (but not exclusively) by means of male role models.<sup>1</sup> Thus imaginative

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<sup>1</sup> Important medieval female knights and warriors are, for example, Camilla, featured in accounts of Aeneas; Brunhild, the Icelandic queen, who plays an important role in the Nibelung mythology; Silence, the hero(ine) of *Roman de Silence*; and Guibourc, William of Orange's wife (formerly a Muslim

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literature establishes chivalry as a mode of male nobility, as a courtly code of conduct, and as a distinct set of social values. These ideologies are also crucial in order to properly evaluate the status of weapons—whether they are inscribed or not—with regard to a broader cultural background. We can safely assume that inscriptions reflect and somehow spell out such gendered values and social demands even if the inscription's content may seem not to do so overtly. But these rather abstract cultural conditions are just one important aspect of weapon's role in literature.

In order to identify weapons that tend to bear inscriptions we have to ask ourselves which weapons are employed, how and in what order they are used, and to what purpose. Certainly, choice, sequence, and usage are crucial with regard to the way inscriptions on weapons are fashioned. The chivalric parameters established for weaponry dictate that a courtly knight will conduct his attacks first with pole weapons (like lances) and then with bladed weapons (like swords). In addition to personal armour (chainmail or moulded metal plates covering at least some parts of the body) the medieval chivalric hero typically also carries a shield to actively block hostile blows and strikes. These knightly weapons are, furthermore, an active part of particular practices, relationships, and spatial arrangements. These aspects have immediate consequences for the way inscriptions on weapons are modelled with regard to, for example, an inscription's positioning, its content, target, reception, and attribution. An inscription on a sword, for instance, is more likely to reflect a relation to its owner than to the enemy. An inscription on a helmet, on the other hand, which is not readable for its wearer, might instead address the enemy.

In contrast to lances and swords, missiles (like javelins) and blunt instruments (like axes or clubs) are deemed dishonourable instruments of war. We can recognise Rainouart as an ambivalent warrior in *Aliscans*, for instance, because although he has a strong body due to his noble lineage he bears an ignoble club.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, therefore, romances and *chansons de geste* do not tell of any inscribed clubs, just as they do not tell of bar fights. It is worth noting that the club is made of wood, not metal. As we learn in the chapter on inscriptions in wood, such objects are more closely associated with nature, easily accessible and relatively unrefined as an artefact. This material's proximity to nature excludes it from the purview of courtly culture, thereby defining the club's bearer as the antithesis of the chivalric hero. Consequently, clubs are represented as not worth the time or resources required to endow them with script because they lack courtliness and, therefore, social merit.

To grasp the significance of inscribed weapons in literature it is useful to keep in mind that these imagined worlds are connected to real-world phenomena. This is even more important because real inscriptions can illuminate the functions and designs of inscriptions with which medieval audiences might have been familiar. That

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princess) featured in the French Guillaume d'Orange cycle. See, with special attention to female warriors and their armour, Stock 1995, 56–83.

<sup>2</sup> See Cowell 2006.

does not mean, however, that these real-world aspects are translated one-to-one into literary story worlds. But we may consider historical script-bearing weapons as a background setting against which chivalric romances and *chansons de geste* stage their inscribed weapons. Archaeological findings of inscribed weapons are, in fact, quite similar to those we encounter in medieval literature. Narrated inscriptions on weapons appear mainly on helmets, coats of mail, swords, lances, and (occasionally) on shields. Similarly, inscriptions on real weapons in Central Europe, mostly retrieved by archaeologists, appear on helmets (like the eighth-century Coppergate helmet from York), shields, coats of mail and especially on swords. Typically these inscriptions are indications of ownership or an artist's mark. The famous Ulfberht swords are perhaps the most prominent examples of an artist's branding, featuring smith's marks and presumably the smith's name—Ulfberht being a distinctly Frankish name. As archaeological findings show, these swords circulated widely. Exemplars from the ninth to the eleventh centuries have been found in Central and Eastern Europe, England, and Scandinavia. The inscription (“+VLFBERHT+” or similar) seems to have been a proper product label and a sign of quality (and therefore even became the object of counterfeiting).

Inscriptions on actual weapons can also provide a devotional link to the transcendent sphere and, consequently, can be a magical enhancement. Other swords show crosses, sequences of letters (standing for a blessing, for instance) and immediately readable inscriptions, often with religious content. Holy words and holy names were “probably supposed to invoke God's holy name and his grace to gain support and protection in battle”.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, many of the abbreviations on swords are notoriously hard to decipher, sometimes even incomprehensible; and scholarship is still in its early stage. That is why John Worley and Thomas Gregor Wagner recently proposed “sword epigraphy,” an interdisciplinary field of epigraphic scholarship devoted especially to inscriptions on swords.<sup>4</sup> Although Worley and Wagner obviously have not yet thought of collaboration with literary studies, fictional script-bearing artefacts may support their scholarship because literature offers additional information on the cultural context and perception of inscribed weapons. For instance, inscriptions on swords may seem unnecessary, even implausible from a modern point of view, because we normally assume that inscriptions do not add anything to the practical functionality of a weapon. Seen rationally, a sword with a name written on it does not cut any better or worse than an uninscribed one. But such a basic material functionality is not everything, especially in a Christian context, and, consequently, medieval epics and romances present a much more complex perspective on the capacities of inscribed weapons. From a medieval point of view inscriptions can be much more than ornamental and much more than just an enhancement of a weapon's basic material functions.

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<sup>3</sup> Wagner et al. 2009, 12.

<sup>4</sup> Worley/Wagner 2013.

## II

My analysis of narrated inscriptions on weapons begins by presenting brief examples from the Norse, English and Latin traditions illustrating the functions inscriptions play in relation to the different types of arms I have outlined. Inscriptions may explicitly perform very basic albeit important functions, such as helping with identification, as we can see in the tale of Sir Gareth in Malory's *Morte Darthur*, presumably written in the 1460s and first published in 1485. The main motifs in the story of Gareth's rise to knighthood are anonymity and disguise. He arrives nameless at King Arthur's court, fights anonymously against knights, and frees a damsel in distress while incognito. Gareth's name and origin are finally exposed when a herald, during a tournament, comes close enough to him to read the inscription on his helmet: *But at the laste an herrowde* ["herald"] *rode nyghe Sir Gareth as he coude, and there he sawe wryten aboute his helme in golde, seyynge, This helme is sir Garethis of Orkeney. Than the heroude cryed as he were woode* ["as if he were mad", read: "with great excitement"]—*and many herowdys with hym: "This is Sir Gareth of Orkenay in the yealow armys!"* (219). Clearly, the inscription is an indication of ownership, a function typical of historical weapons. Though this might seem mundane at first sight, the letters intervene dramatically here to expose the formerly mysterious knight. The inscription functions as an authentication device, as the chain of shouting heralds proceeds to broadcast what is treated as credible information to the whole tournament at record speed. Gareth can only maintain his disguise by virtue of a magical ring which lets him change the colour of his armour to leave the tournament unnoticed. Interestingly, writing here appears to be the only truth that is not questioned or undermined. Indeed, the inscription is proof of the power of the written word to cut through the doubt and ignorance in a world where writing is largely absent.

Not every inscription is meant to be read, though. In the Old Norse *Sigrdrífumál* (thirteenth c.) we find some instructions on how to scratch runes of victory (*Sigrúnar*) into various parts of a sword: *Sigrúnar þú skalt rísta*, the text says, *ef þú vilt sigr hafa* ("runes of victory you shall inscribe if you want to gain a victory", stanza 6, 191).<sup>5</sup> These inscriptions are presumably thought to perform an apotropaic function, to turn away harm and to obtain protection from the gods. In this case, emphasis is placed on the writing, not the reading, of the inscription. Thus, an inscribed weapon's effectiveness is not necessarily predicated on it being read. King Richard's spear whereon *Goddess hyghe name* is engraved in the early fourteenth-century *Richard Cœur de Lyon* (5720) functions similarly. This inscription marks the end and climax of a description of Richard's armour, which also features figures of leopards and the image of a dove. The name of God is distinct, however, because it transcends the representative functions of the figurative portrayals to enhance the weapon's physical potential. Inscription here allows the lance to partake in the sacral sphere of godly influence.

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5 For runes on (real) weapons see: Grünzweig 2004.

No wonder then that this script-bearing artefact points to actual historical practices among crusaders.<sup>6</sup>

Smith's marks, similarly, may be read from time to time but are not meant for repeated reading. Sometimes, it is not even completely clear if these marks consist of linguistic characters, or whether they should be treated iconographically. In *Waltharius*, a Latin epic probably composed in the ninth century, Walthar, preparing for his escape, asks Hiltgunt to get a specific coat of mail, the one with the smith's marks (*loricam fabrorum insigne ferentem*, 264). This is an early narrative example of such a mark, clearly backed up by archaeological findings where such marks identify weapons of extraordinary quality.

My last brief example, an inscription on a shield in the Old Norse *Magus Saga Jarls* (c.1300), is rather unusual because it transforms the shield's bearer (38). This shield moves us away from historical realia into the purely magical and fantastical realm and highlights how writing can transform an object, giving it completely new capacities. Everybody who carries the shield of Rögnvaldr, engraved with runes by Jarl Mágus, looks just like Rögnvaldr himself. This results in the tragedy of a warrior killing his own son, while believing he is killing Rögnvaldr. Here the runic inscription transforms the object entirely, changing rather than merely enhancing its use value. It does not have to be a shield to do this work (the warrior could wear a ring or drink a potion to get the same effect), but the shield as a duplication of a warrior's body is a metaphorically appealing object for such a magical act of protectively obscuring identity.

### III

And yet, inscriptions on weapons do more than merely determine identity, as does a badge or an identifying mark. As part of an accumulation and entanglement of things and animate beings, inscriptions also participate in the construction of knightly identity in a much broader sense. The medieval knight, as indicated by the French term *chevalier* or the German term *Ritter*, is by definition a mounted warrior. He is defined by a series of complex relationships between himself, his mount and his armament, which simultaneously present him as combat-ready and worthy of the court. These components are more than just parts and extensions of his body; they are an essential part of the hybrid unit we rather simplistically call "knight". These horse-man-metal hybrids—what Jeffrey Cohen, inspired by Deleuze and Guattari, calls an "assemblage"—undermine distinctions between the human subject, the animal, and inanimate object.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> For further information and a more detailed discussion of *Richard Coeur de Lyon* see Christine Neufeld's and Ricarda Wagner's chapter on British literature in this volume.

<sup>7</sup> Cohen 2003, 46 et passim. See also Crane 2011, 70 et passim.

One manifestation of such blurred distinctions is the frequent naming of both horses and weapons in heroic narratives. Naming creates a special relationship, an appreciation that, in the case of the horse, makes a companion out of a beast and creates a “man-animal alliance”.<sup>8</sup> Knights in romance often treat their mounts almost like comrades or even friends.<sup>9</sup> We grasp, for instance, how attached Gawain is to his horse “Gringuljete” in *Parzival* through his relief at their reunion after Gringuljete is abducted. Just like horses, important weapons also receive names. Such naming emphasises that the knight’s sword is portrayed as much more than a passive instrument belonging to a knight. In heroic poetry swords are not merely described as acting like persons, but rather, as Arthur Thomas Hatto already suggested in 1966, “swords are persons”.<sup>10</sup> For our purposes we may take this to mean that swords can act as agents in a narrative. This is most evident when swords have their own histories. In *Chanson d’Aspremont*, for example, a twelfth-century epic and prequel to *Chanson de Roland*, we learn of the Muslim history of one of Roland’s signature objects, his sword Durendal.<sup>11</sup> Objects with names can even move from one narrative to another, as we see with Beowulf’s sword Nægling, which is strikingly similar to a sword called Naglringr in the Old Norse *Þiðreks saga af Bern*. Naglringr “was made by the dwarf Alfrikr, who, when captured by Þiðrekr, ransoms his life by stealing it from its owner, the giant Grímur, and giving it to Þiðrekr” who later “gives it to Heimir, whose first sword was Blodgang”.<sup>12</sup> Viewing the weapon from a biographical perspective, this is not only a list of persons but a map of a certain sword’s peregrination and an account of a series of relationships.

Such “biographies of artefacts” that naming facilitates provide vivid evidence of the significance and liveliness of weapons in the medieval imagination.<sup>13</sup> Naming a weapon contributes to its anthropomorphism and, thus, furnishes it with a kind of agency. Inscriptions support this process, giving a weapon both prestige and, most importantly, a voice. This should not come as a surprise, since, as James Paz has pointed out recently with regard to Anglo-Saxon material culture, there are “embodied” voices whose bodies “are not fleshy human ones”.<sup>14</sup> Crucial here is the fact that these inscriptions are not just letters to be read silently, but function here especially in an oral mode to generate voices that speak to us.

It is worth elaborating this thought a little further because it reveals a crucial gap in scholarly debate. Among the many things we may learn by examining narrated inscriptions, their positioning in-between and even beyond established categories

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<sup>8</sup> Cohen 2003, 53.

<sup>9</sup> See Ohly 1995.

<sup>10</sup> *The Nibelungenlied*, 401.

<sup>11</sup> See Khanmohamadi 2017.

<sup>12</sup> See Gillespie 1973, 96.

<sup>13</sup> See Kopytoff 1986.

<sup>14</sup> Paz 2017, 2.

like oral and written culture is crucial. For quite some time now, medievalists have engaged in discussions about medieval literature's status with regard to orality and literacy, and with regard to pictures and writing. As useful as these categories have proved to be, these binaries tend to marginalise narrated inscriptions because they do not fit neatly in any of those categories. Produced outside of the manuscript culture that defines literacy, inscriptions can also function simultaneously as iconography and language, as evidenced by the Chi-Rho or chrismon (a monogram of the first two letters of Greek *Khristos*, chi X and rho P). Inscriptions, such as the epitaph, require the reader to voice them. Therefore, when asked why medievalists have paid little attention to narrated inscriptions, we may want to point out that these extraordinary script-bearing artefacts have slipped through the cracks of the established scholarly discussions because they complicate the parameters of the debates.

To begin to understand this complexity, let us turn our attention to an impressive voice-bearing artefact: Roland's helmet in the German version of *Chanson de Roland*, adapted by a priest called Konrad c. 1170. This example illustrates several of the aforementioned arguments: the helmet clearly is intrinsically tied to its heroic wearer; its inscription is placed on the outside of the helmet and therefore addresses the enemy; via the inscription the helmet is anthropomorphised; the inscription establishes a spatial relation in terms of the proximity and withdrawal of the enemy reader; the helmet and inscription are an expression of Roland's heroic identity; and, not least, the helmet bears a name the inscription spells out.

In Konrad's *Rolandslied*, the helmet appears for the first time before the Battle of Roncevaux when the narrator carefully describes how Roland arms himself. He puts on a bright tunic with a golden dragon attached to its breast, as well as splendid leg-coverings bedecked with gold and pearls; he bears a spear to which he attaches a white flag embroidered with animals and birds. Finally, he takes his sword, Durendart, and dons a helmet, which also bears a name:

*der helm hiez Venerant,  
den der helt ûf bant,  
mit golde beworchten,  
den die haiden harte vorchten.  
mit guldinen buochstaben  
was an der listen ergraben:  
“elliu werlt wâfen,  
die müezen mich maget lâzen.  
wilt du mich gewinnen,  
du füerest scaden hinnen”.*  
(3291–3300)

The helmet the hero put on  
was called “Venerant”,  
embraced with gold—  
the heathens feared it.  
Golden letters  
were inscribed on the metal stripe:  
“All the weapons of the world  
have to leave me a maid.  
If you try to capture me,  
you'll carry damage away with you.”<sup>15</sup>

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15 Translation is mine; compare Laura Velte's and Michael R. Ott's article on German inscriptions in this volume.

Unlike the other parts of Roland's outfit, which are opulent (gold, gems) and figurative (dragon, animals), the helmet displays not only quality and value but also performs a speech act as a somehow independent actor that nevertheless is closely tied to the hero. Interestingly, the claim to behold its maidenhood figuratively gives it a specifically human body, intensifying the anthropomorphism of this remarkable artefact.

To be sure, not all script-bearing weapons are so extraordinary. Nonetheless inscriptions make a specific weapon stand out from all the other uninscribed weaponry. Script adds something merely by its existence, not in terms of basic material qualities but in terms of cultural capital, creating prestige objects. Roland's helmet, for example, not only bears a name but makes a name for itself and, consequently, for its wearer. Thus, inscriptions on weapons mark the weapon as special and transform a rather ordinary item into an object of increased and attentive perception. That is why the inscription's reference to the heathens' fear is important: The heathens' fear is the counterpart of the helmet's ostentatious voice, the reaction to an aggressive invocation of an anthropomorphic and an acting object.

Whereas a helmet directs its voice at an opponent, other objects, like swords, tend to address their owners. Of course, not all swords have owners, as is evident with one of the most famous weapons of medieval literature, the sword in the stone, a motif that appears in the Matter of Britain in relation to both King Arthur and Galahad, the Grail Knight. Nevertheless, the sword's quest for its rightful owner illustrates the complex role the inscribed weapon plays in the constitution not only of the knight but of the hero and the world he inhabits. The iconicity of the sword in the stone in contemporary popular culture, particularly movies inspired by Malory's *Morte Darthur*, makes it a familiar narrative device as a public test that identifies a hero and determines his destiny.

The iconicity the sword in the stone has gained is hardly surprising given the theatricality of its initial appearance in the thirteenth-century *La Queste del Saint Graal*, and subsequent vernacular translations, such as Malory's *Morte*. In Book One of Malory's version, the Tale of Sankgreal, Lancelot arrives at King Arthur's court without Galahad whom he dubbed knight that very morning. At the court, the crowds are drawn to the spectacle of a marvel that requires the audience to learn its own part in the play: a red marble stone is floating down the river, into which is inserted a sword bearing an inscription. The inscription provides the script for how to interact with and understand the puzzle it presents as a part of the Quest for the Holy Grail. First, the inscription on the sword accompanies another inscription on the Siege Perilous. Just like the sword, the seat's inscription reserves it for a special knight, that is, for Galahad. Both inscriptions are intrusions of a higher power making its will legible. Contrary to expectations, this inscription by a higher power does not change the order of things. As Michelle R. Wright points out, "the arming ritual" in the Vulgate Cycle "most often does not actually transform a male character into a knight. Rather, the



investment of the hero with arms renders visible an ontology, that is, an essence of being, that always already exists".<sup>16</sup>

Second, even though the familiarity of this scene might render the inscription redundant in our contemporary imaginations, the assemblage of sword and stone is actually enigmatic and requires explanation. In Malory, the king and his knights hurry to see this astonishing artefact. But, although they can see the material arrangement, what it means and how it works remains unclear. That is why the inscription is so important: as a kind of manual it offers a practical set of instructions that turn the mysterious artefact into a tool used in the mundane political world.

Drawn to the river, Arthur and his knights attempt to decipher the enigmatic arrangement, their gaze moving upwards, from the stone to the sword and, finally, to the inscribed pommel. This episode in which the court collectively reads the artefact is translated quite consistently in the various vernacular translations of the French original, a corpus that suggests its own collective extradiegetic reading event:<sup>17</sup>

*Li rois descent maintenant pour ceste merveille veoir, et si font tout li autre. Et quant il furent venu a la rive, si troverent le perron qui estoit issus de l'aigue et estoit de marbre vermeil; et el perron avoit une espee fichie qui estoit et bele et riche par samblant, et ert li poins d'une pierre precieuse ouvrés molt soltilment a lettres d'or.*

*Li baron regardent les lettres qui disoient: JA NUS M'OSTERA SE CIL NON A QUI COSTÉ JE PENDRAI ET CIL SERA LI MILDRES CHEVALIERS DEL MONDE.*

*So all the knyghtes wente with hym; and whan they cam unto the ryver they founde there a stone fletynge, as hit were of rede marbyll, and therein stake a fayre ryche swerde, and the pomell thereof was of precious stonys wrought with lettirs of golde subtylé.*

*Than the barownes redde the lettirs, whych seyde in thys wyse:*

*NEVER SHALL MAN TAKE ME HENSE BUT ONLY HE BY WHOS SYDE I OUGHT TO HONGE: AND HE SHALL BE THE BESTE KNYGHT OF THE WORLDE.*

*Und der konig ging hinab die abentúr zu besehen, und also daten die anderen alle. Da sie kamen an das waßer, da sahen sie das die sùle was ußer dem waßer und was von marmolsteyn rott. Und in der sùlen sahen sie das ein schwert was gehefft richlich und gar schön. Und das hefft von dem schwert was ein rubin, und waren guldin buchstaben gar behediclich darinn gegraben. Und die held besahen die buchstaben, die sprachen: "Nýmant sol mich hynnen uß ziehen, es sy dann der mich von recht haben sol und sol auch der best ritter syn in der welt".*

*E quando el rey lleo a la ribera, e vio el padron, e la espada ay metida por el encantamento de Merlin, assi como el cuento lo ha deuisado, e via la vayna que estava cerca de la espada e las letras que Merlin escriuiera, fue todo espantado, e dixo: "Nuevas vos dire agora: sabed que por esta espada sera començado el mejor cauallero del mundo, y esta es la prueua por que se ha de conocer, ca ninguno, si no fuere el mejor cauallero del mundo, no podria sacar la spada deste padron".*

<sup>16</sup> Wright 1995, 45.

<sup>17</sup> *Le Livre du Graal III*, 814f.; Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, 498 [The Sankgreal]; *Prosalancelot V*, 18; *Libros de Caballerías*, 166b [La demanda del Sancto Grial].

The inscription on the sword not only gives the sword a voice but also a destined location: the hip of a knight where the sword is *ought to honge*, as Malory's version states. The placement of the sword also socially "places" Galahad, the knight on whose side it will hang. For Galahad, though, this sword is just an interim weapon. He receives swords three times, with each weapon signalling a new stage of his journey: "the first [sword] associates Galahad with the Arthurian court and is given by Lancelot; the second establishes a celestial allegiance and appears mysteriously in a floating stone near Arthur's court; and the third signals Galahad's final spiritual perfection".<sup>18</sup>

The repeated arming of Galahad epitomises the entanglement of the heroic subject with the object world. Galahad does not just wield a weapon well, he wields a particular weapon that not only establishes but determines his identity. The swords also make apparent the object's agency to change the relationships of the narrated world. Indeed, the sword in the stone with its inscription is, literally, an adventure, something that forces itself on Arthur, his knights, and Galahad—something that has to be dealt with because it approaches and addresses them. The inscription is the voice of a challenge, and a test. The whole arrangement stages a public event, visually materialising the chivalric world's search for the best knight, thereby choreographing acts and reorganising social relations and hierarchies. That is what makes this scene so special: we can watch a weapon, suddenly washed ashore, staging a quest for its destined owner and thereby transforming the Arthurian story-world.

## IV

The other Grail knight Parzival in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* also vividly illustrates how closely a knight's identity is tied to his weapons. The protagonist's childhood in the woods denied him chivalric accoutrements. The only weapons he has—a javelin as well as bow and arrow—are ignoble from a courtly point of view. Consequently, when Parzival sets out to become a knight his first experience of combat fighting Ither of Gaheviez is a violation of knightly behaviour; the young hero has yet to learn that a courtly knight does not kill his opponent from a cowardly distance with a missile, or use ignoble tools to harm a fellow (and, in this case, even related) knight. Nevertheless, negative consequences are yet to come, while the immediate results are certainly favourable—at least for Parzival. By slaying Ither, Parzival gains the remarkable armour of red gold that earns Ither the designation, The Red Knight (155,4–158,16). Parzival perceives this act of appropriation as legitimate because King Arthur granted him the spoils of this battle conducted on his behalf. This "gift" highlights the cultural framework operating in chivalric romance in which persons are connected via the transfer of things. The red armour belongs to those "highly individuated and

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<sup>18</sup> Wright 1995, 46.

personalized objects” which are typical for gift-giving cultures.<sup>19</sup> Such objects have, as Andrew Cowell has pointed out, their “own specific history” and are able to “metonymically express the identity of the owner or giver”.<sup>20</sup> With the help of his newly acquired metal skin, and with the help of a squire who has to assist him in putting on the intricate accoutrements, Parzival provisionally enters knighthood by becoming the Red Knight, identifiable in the adventures that follow solely by his armour. This armour, then, does not just represent the knight but becomes a part of him, an extension of his body, and the source of his identity.

Wolfram’s *Parzival* as a whole elegantly illustrates the entanglement of humans and the material world and therefore offers an excellent example of the knight as assemblage that merits closer analysis. We may read this passage of Parzival’s early career as a comprehensive introduction to the rules of chivalric combat, arms and armour. The lesson directed at the hero simultaneously invites the aristocratic audience to rediscover the unusual complexity of a knightly assemblage it has come to take for granted. In fact, many lessons Wolfram von Eschenbach offers in his Grail narrative come by way of objects that instruct readers through their inscriptions. *Parzival*’s highly involved narrator repeatedly broaches the issue of the relation between the oral and the written, source and adaption, and medium and communication, more broadly speaking. These issues are particularly focalised by several script-bearing artefacts that appear during the narration, where script, materiality, and communication extend far beyond the context of quill and parchment. Still another important reason for discussing inscriptions in Wolfram’s *Parzival* is how remarkably different his approach to narrated inscriptions is in comparison to Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval*—Wolfram’s source, though one he elaborates and adapts significantly.

Chrétien’s romance (written around the year 1180) includes only one single narrated inscription. This inscription, a smith’s mark that indicates provenance, is a realistic detail evoking real-world swords; but this inscription does not have much impact on the narrative. The context is quickly recounted: After Perceval finds his way to the Grail Castle, he receives a magnificent sword from the wounded Fisher King. It is remarkable because it is lightweight, because there are only three of its kind and because it will never break—except when threatened by a certain peril, known only to its forger. Even the place of production is known because it is written on the sword: *Si vit bien ou ele fu faite; / Car en l’espee estoit escrit* (“By this means he saw clearly, where it had been made because it was written on the sword”, 3136f.). Although the sword is distinguished by this mark as special, even exceptional, the inscription is primarily an indicator of prestige. What is remarkable, however, is what Wolfram von Eschenbach made of this inscription.

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<sup>19</sup> Cowell 2006, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Cowell 2006, 8.

We may assume that Wolfram, as a reader of Chrétien, used the inscription on the sword as the inspiration for his numerous script-bearing artefacts. The transfer of this inscription and artefact into Wolframs “re-narration” marks the first instance of several inscriptions on things related to the grail. Indeed, the idea of inscribing things seems to have provided the German author with a narrative tool to expand the range of writing within his story-world. Ultimately, Wolfram’s romance contains a whole cluster of inscriptions and related phenomena, including a number of inscribed weapons. The inscriptions themselves fall into different kinds of categories. Some are about knowledge and communication, some are related to persons, some are about blessing and healing. Hence, the inscribed weapons fall somewhere on a spectrum between natural signs and manuscript textuality. A quick overview might be helpful to get an impression of the amplitude of relevant phenomena.

I will start with the more abstract examples. In his *Parzival*, Wolfram presents (1) stars as writing; or, more precisely, he presents a certain stellar constellation as writing (454,21–23). We learn about this when the narrator explains to us that a heathen named Flegetanis once read the name of the grail in the stars. (2) Parzival’s half-brother, Feirefiz, whose brindled skin is black and white, is described (by Parzival) as looking like a parchment with writing on it (747,26–29). Although Parzival is speaking figuratively, he nevertheless connects the idea of writing (on parchment) with the living body as a material to write on. Similar to the connection of writing on parchment and skin are the (3) drops of blood on snow Parzival encounters near King Arthur and his court (282,1ff.). The red drops on white blood remind Parzival of his beloved; as signs, the drops of blood work much like alphabetical script. Their impact, however, is overwhelming, showing the power of well-placed signs. After reading and deciphering the signs as the face of his beloved, Parzival falls into a trance-like state that can only be suspended by breaking his fixated gaze from the drops of blood.

(4) The inscription on the grail combines these more abstract inscriptions on the one hand and concrete and durable inscriptions on the other. In Wolfram’s account the grail is a stone brought to earth by fallen angels, which bears inscriptions repeatedly and regularly (470,21–30; 483,19–484,12; 781,12–19; 796,17–21; 818,20–819,2). These inscriptions appear suddenly and disappear after they have been read. Since these “text messages” disappear after reading, they interestingly share the characteristics of oral communication. Therefore, they deliver very precise messages. The inscriptions inform the grail community about new members; they predict how Anfortas can be healed; and they even introduce new rules. At the end of Wolfram’s romance, for instance, an inscription announces to the Grail Company that whoever becomes the next ruler may not be asked about his origin and ancestry. Similar to the inscription on Sir Gareth’s helmet, the grail’s messages are not to be questioned but promulgate authority, mediated specifically by the written word.

Interestingly, the most concrete inscriptions appear on armour. (5) Parzival’s father, Gahmuret, is honoured with an epitaph that is engraved into his diamond helmet (107,29ff.) While the chapter on inscriptions in medieval German literature

features a discussion of this important passage, for our purposes it is worth noting that Gahmuret was killed by the blow of a lance that penetrated his helmet and head. Thus, the inscription's positioning is highly significant: the epitaph links Gahmuret's grave, his most important piece of armour, the reason for his death, and the memorial inscription.

(6) Just like in Chrétien's account, the sword Parzival receives as a gift from the Fisher King bears some signs or marks (*mâl*, 254,14), maybe smith's marks, maybe letters. (7) The lance that wounds Anfortas, the Grail King, bears either the name of the grail or the name of the lance's owner. If we understand the equivocal text passage in the latter sense, the attacker's name on the lance makes the attack and the resulting injury even more personal (479,20–23). (8) Anfortas has a sword—assumed to be the one given to Parzival by the Fisher King—which has a blessing inscribed explaining how to forge two knives needed to care for Anfortas's wound (490,18–29).

Considering *Parzival* as laying out a spectrum of reading and writing, script-bearing weapons have to be placed somewhere between reading of natural signs, manuscript culture and a martial culture that is supposed to get along without writing. Smith's marks render readable the quality of a weapon, exposing invisible material properties to the eyes of the beholder. Inscribed swords, as instruments that wound *and* heal, link medical knowledge and those very injuries that necessitate medicine in the first place. Gahmuret's helmet, being transformed from an impenetrable weapon to an elaborate epitaph, enters manuscript culture by means of its bearer's death as a defunct object. Finally, the inscribed lance that wounds Anfortas is used by its owner as a kind of writing, making Anfortas's wound a bloody testimony of personal hatred.

Regardless of where exactly we place Wolfram von Eschenbach's script-bearing weapons on such a spectrum, the crucial point is that he uses them repeatedly in order to overlay his story's arms with a semiotic layer that seriously complicates the romance's order of things. By using weapons as a material to write on, he considerably expands the boundaries of writing itself. But Wolfram also broadens the significance of artefacts that are first of all meant to harm or defend, and not to write hatred, to transfer knowledge, or to function as a memorial inscription. Those martial artefacts cease to be mere instruments of war and are made readable as cultural objects embedded into a vernacular literature that has just started to rewrite warrior culture as chivalry in order to narrate—that is, to understand—military acts as cultural deeds.

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