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Color By Knight: Archetypal and Heraldic Symbolism in “Sir Gareth of Orkney”

In the medieval world, magic was not the only thing that could transform a young kitchen boy into a shining prince. Gareth’s transformation in *Le Morte Darthur* is perpetrated by his own will and mapped through archetypal and heraldic symbolism... with only a little magical interference. For the fine handed kitchen knight of Malory’s “Sir Gareth of Orkney” has to face more than simple knights on his quest; symbolically they are representations of himself, nature, and society that must be overcome through the internalization of their aspects. **[this is a good intro, but could be a bit more substantial; I have cleaned up the errors in the paper, which originally received a 94/A]**

Along this journey, the first field presented to Gareth is civilization. For even before he leaves on his quest with Dame Lyonet and the ‘true’ trials come, he must deal with a twelvemonth introduction at Camelot and the dynamics of courtly life. For a prince, “a king’s son and a queen’s; and his father high King Lot of Orkney and his mother is sister to King Arthur, and he is brother to Sir Gawain” (Malory 149) all of fine status, one would suspect that Gareth would have fared exceedingly well at court. The only problem is that he refuses to reveal this pedigree to the people of Camelot until the very end of his tale, instead portraying himself as part of a far lower class, though well behaved for it.

If Gareth's goal is to become a knight, his ultimate purpose will be to integrate himself successfully into the world that Camelot represents. Though its destruction looms on the horizon, as the home of the Table Round and knights the caliber of Sir Lancelot, Camelot is given as the default epitome of chivalry and knighthood. Gareth's approach seems contrary to his goal. By hiding his birthright and miming inferiority, he makes that very acceptance much harder to purchase. Yet Gareth cannot completely hide his true worth, for the first color associated with him is one of greatest value. This association comes just as he is leaving Camelot on Dame Lyonesse's quest, as Malory describes, "trapped in cloth of gold" (123). The color gold is interesting from a heraldry interpretation because yellow and gold fall under the same classification of 'Or,' meaning "generosity and elevation of the mind" (Fleur-de-lis Designs, screen 1). This becomes pertinent later in the tale when Gareth's chameleon-like escapades in color finally settle: "before he was in many colours, and now he is but in one colour, and that is yellow" (Malory 163). Not only is this an early hint of his final outcome, but it also weaves itself through his character and actions. As his mother describes him, "ever sithen he was grown he was marvelously witted" (Malory 157), directly referring to his secrets within the Arthurian Court. Here not only is Gareth being tested by the world, but he is also testing the world around him to his own standards.

In archetypal terms, gold literally represents "self-worth/value" and ultimately the "incorruptible self" (Alyson, screen 2). Taken at this stage, when he has only just begun his trials, perhaps this indicates not only his inherited worth, but his success in the first twelvemonth stage. For it would not represent his earned worth as a knight as he had not yet become one at that point in the story. This is highlighted by his departure from

Arthur's court in the glorious appearance of a knight through his armor and horse, but with "neither spear nor shield" (Malory 123). The good behavior that I mentioned earlier would certainly have been stressed by Kay's constant jibes and the indignity of his position at Camelot. Indeed, the weapon against Gareth that society seems to employ comes in the form of speech, as during the initial miles of his journey with Dame Lyonet, she too taunts him mercilessly. But what is most fascinating is the matter of her taunts. Putting aside her repeated allusions to uncleanness with the epithet "foul kitchen knave" (Malory 127), her main ammunition is cowardice. "'Gramercy . . . for always ye would have me a coward'" (Malory 128), Gareth complains, yet this is actually a most fitting challenge to him. His actions make it clear that he is not, in fact, a coward. Instead it is his continuing association with yellow that forms the connection. In archetypes there is not only a positive meaning for colors, but also a negative one, and yellow's negative interpretation is cowardice (Ackroyd 314). To employ a different genre, think of the Western phrase "ya yello bellied coward." Here the repeated tests of bravery are not only apt symbolically, but also practically when considering the goal of knighthood. In these cases, Gareth has already internalized two difficult lessons from society: he has faced his own possible shortcomings in the form of cowardice in battle and pride at court.

The next phase of the cultural test comes within Dame Lyonet's quest, and thus is mixed with the second field, Nature. Just as the first test was an opposition to Gareth's internal nature (braver/ cowardliness, self-worth and his noble lineage/ his lowly status at court), the Nature aspect of these tests oppose Gareth's external goals in the realm of civilization. They also mirror the questing knight's function, which is to go out from the center of society, gain victory over the Other, and then return. Working with the tale's

own chronology, let us turn to nature while continuing with society. The medieval landscape of Arthurian Legend offers a map plentiful with wilderness and pebbled with islands of civilization. This means that as soon as Gareth and Dame Lyonet leave Camelot they are immediately faced with nature and any tests she may feel fit to pose them. For Gareth this did not take the form of natural forces such as storms or fires, but human representations of nature.

This is first embodied in the two knights that Gareth must face at the river crossing. I also note that Gareth has now truly embarked upon his quest at this point, leaving everything familiar behind him except what he carries within himself. In this context, the river encounter also marks an important step in the Hero Quest, the “Wall of Paradise,” where the two knights become the Threshold Guardians. Described by Nicholas of Cusa, the threshold guardians are a “coincidence of opposites” (qtd. in Campbell 89). Apropos to their role, Malory’s river guards fulfill this both as representatives of nature and civilization. The manner in which Gareth kills the knights brings about the opposites of nature, water and land:

At the last Sir Beaumains smote the other upon the helm that his head astoned, and therewith he fell down in the water, and there was he drowned. And then he spurred his horse upon the land, and therewith the other knight fell upon him...but at the last Sir Beaumains cleaved his helm and his head down to the shoulders.

(Malory 127)

Not only does this present a dichotomy for the purposes of the guardians’ role, but a deeper meaning for Gareth’s journey as well. Among archetypes, water is representative

of the unconscious (Alyson, screen 6). In this context, his battle “in midst of the water” (Malory 127) outwardly expresses the beginning of his inner journey of transformation as he delves deeper into himself. This idea is quickly followed up by his battle with the Black Knight, black also being a color of the unconscious and “the first step in the transformation process in which the old is destroyed in order for new creation of the Self to occur” (Alyson, screen 2). That Gareth then takes the Black Knight’s armor for his own and wears it for the rest of his quest to rescue Dame Lyonesse only cements the unconscious aspect of his journey. Returning to the river guards, the fact that he kills the land knight by cutting off his head is also telling, for the guardian is supposed to be “the highest spirit of reason” (Nicholas, qtd. in Campbell 89) who is passed by being overcome. Given Gareth’s own intellectual associations, the fact that his execution of choice throughout the tale is beheading his opponents gains another light. The social dichotomy of this encounter is not revealed, like so much else in this tale, until much later. “They were two good knights, but they were murderers” (Malory 139), Dame Lyonesse explains. Here the opposition lies between their knightly occupations, ordered by the rules of chivalry, and their crimes in the context of societal rules.

The clearest representative of nature comes in the form of the Green Knight, encountered by Gareth just after he kills the Black Knight. Self-intuitively, the color green is intimately tied to nature and plants. Malory seems to exploit this theme, using imagery fertile with nature references. Dame Lyonet’s comment from the sidelines, “Alas, it is shame that ever ye were made knight, to see such a lad to match you as the weed growth over the corn” (Malory 130), is an excellent example of this. To take it even further, the Green Knight is encountered in a forest, later showing his mastery of that

domain by guiding Gareth and his opinionated damsel safely through it. Once again, the forest's archetypal meanings include the unconscious: "In fairy tales, the child must enter the forest of the unconscious, inner self to overcome an impossible task given by a wise woman (witch) in order for individuation to take place" (Alyson, screen 3). This seems perfectly matched to Gareth's quest. His quest was initiated by Dame Lyonet, who we discover later in the events of the story, possesses magical powers of healing that she uses to test Gareth's love and honor. It is also Dame Lyonet who insists that each knight Gareth faces far outmatches him, making his battle futile before it ever starts. Of course that is exactly the opposite of what really takes place, "ever ye threaten me I shall be beaten with knights that we meet, but ever for all your boasts they all lie in the dust or in the mire" (Malory 134), Gareth tells her in his defense. Green is also the second color in the stages of individuation (Alyson, screen 2) that began with the Black Knight.

Keeping with that process, Gareth next meets the Red Knight. While red is not the third color in the sequence, the knight's home "a white tower as any snow" (Malory 132) easily represents the color that is. The use of the color white at this time serves not only to continue the pattern being set, but differentiates the character of this Red Knight from the evil deeds of the Red Knight of the Red Lauds that Gareth encounters at the walls of the Castle Perilous. At this point the quality of Gareth's tests begins to turn away from a nature emphasis back toward civilization. Where before he encountered his opponents at rivers or in forests devoid of any kind of structures, the Red Knight lives in a mixture of nature and society with the tower and tournament tents laid out on "a fair meadow" (Malory 132). To this end, the description that "over the tower gate there hung fifty shields of divers colours" (Malory 132) is interesting. It serves as an example of a

rainbow, which may “symbolize bridging the gap between yourself as you are and your true self” (Ackroyd 252). As the middle encounter of five beginning with the river guards (and framed by his joust with Sir Lancelot at the beginning of his journey and his fight with his brother Sir Gawain at the end), it serves to mark Gareth’s progress toward his final destination. But what is most interesting is that it is a man-made rainbow, represented by the defining item of a knight, his shield. Once again, the natural world is being presented through the eyes of societal trappings.

The next knight that Gareth meets on his quest, the Inde Knight, does not fit into the sequence of colors that has been followed so far. The fourth stage should be red. It is almost as if Malory extended the passage of this stage by placing the Red Knight in the white tower and then repeating it again with the Red Knight of the Red Launds that Gareth must face at the ‘end’ of his quest. Yet the Inde Knight remains a symbolic character nonetheless. If he does not continue the pattern of colors, he instead continues the dominance of civilization over nature. Coming into the encounter, “they were ware where was before them a city rich and fair, and betwixt them and the city, a mile and more, there was a fair meadow that seemed new mown, and therein were many pavilions fair to behold” (Malory 134). The progression has moved from tents, to a tower, to the ultimate representation of civilization, the city. What little nature remains, in the form of the meadow, has also been shaped to fulfill man’s desire, its wildness cut into uniformity.

As the representation of civilization to Gareth, blue is an appropriate color. Archetypally it symbolizes intuition, inspiration, and communication (Alyson, screen 2). Its heraldic interpretation similarly includes truth (Fleur-de-lis Designs, screen 1). These follow the theme that Gareth himself seems to take, that proper society is represented

through intelligence and honor vs. the brute strength and emotion that the Red Knight of the Red Launds embodies. This episode also includes a reversal of the kind of communication that has been seen in the tale so far. To begin, the Inde Knight is the first knight portrayed with motivations other than warfare. Where all the other knights wished to fight Gareth on sight, the Inde Knight “sent unto them weather he [Gareth] came in war or in peace” (Malory 136). Instead he only decides to fight after Gareth has sent him the choice of battle. Even more interesting, Gareth’s battle with the Inde Knight is preceded by a complete character change by Dame Lyonet. Until this point she has harassed Gareth mercilessly, but now she gives him words of concern rather than scorn, in recognition of his true worth as a knight. The Inde Knight seems to mirror this new level of prestige that Gareth has attained. His intelligence serves him well in seeing the truth of the world around him, for he is the first knight on the quest not to mistake Gareth for the Black Knight and his own brother. He is even awarded the honor of being consistently called by his own name, Sir Persant. Generally, the Inde Knight presents more of a character than any other knight Gareth faces on his journey to rescue Dame Lyonesse save the Red Knight of the Red Launds, to whom I will now turn.

The final field that Gareth faces is himself. Truly he has been facing this since the moment he appeared in Camelot, for it is the underlying purpose behind his entire tale. Yet it is not until he reaches his Ladylove, Dame Lyonesse, that this aspect is brought to the foreground. If Gareth’s method of initiation is to internalize the aspects of his opponents, then the Red Knight of the Red Launds poses his greatest test, for he embodies the emotional turmoil and lusts that threaten Gareth’s ideals of intellect. Symbolically, red represents “blood, life-force; embarrassment, anger; fire, lust,

passion... activity, energy, courage, will power, and war” (Alyson, screen 4). Malory’s Red Knight of the Red Launds seems to embrace these concepts. His siege is centered on a woman who cannot love him for his heinous murders and based on the revenge of the woman he truly loved. His battle with Gareth is the bloodiest yet of the tale. Ironically, the heraldic symbolism of red, while including warriors and military strength, also includes magnanimity, which is completely opposite to the Red Knight of the Red Launds’ character. His brutality seems to mirror the same bloody revenge that Gareth shies from in his own brother, Sir Gawain, in the end. “He withdrew himself from his brother Sir Gawain’s fellowship, for he was ever vengeable, and where he hated he would be avenged with murder; and that hated Sir Gareth” we are told by Malory (167). The connection is even further strengthened by the Red Knight of the Red Launds’ strange quirk of strength which increases “until men say he hath seven men’s strength” (Malory 142) at noon. Sir Gawain shares this power. Until this point, the story has been hinting at this battle between brothers by having the first three knights mistake Gareth for their brother, the Black Knight. By connecting the final knight to Gareth’s true brother, the internalization is not only emotional, but by blood.

Throughout the tale, Gareth has been hiding his true identity. And this is continued till the very end when he wears Dame Lyonesse’s magic ring. Where he had internalized the previous knights by facing and defeating them in their own form by wearing their brother’s armor, at the end he literally takes on all the colors that he has faced and all they represent. That his actions at the tournament are hailed for their glory is no mistake, for he is almost at his final stage. All that remains is his confrontation with

his brother Sir Gawain, which the previous battles have prepared him for. In the end, Gareth was not simply battling knights for the sake of victory, but to attain his true self.

[The student recreated this paper for me, as she could not find the original graded copy. The Works Cited page is missing in this version. You need to have one.]