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True Colors: The Significance of Machaut’s and Chaucer’s Use of Blue to Represent Fidelity

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In one of Guillaume de Machaut’s lyrics, a jilted lover laments his lady’s unfaithfulness with the refrain: “Qu’en lieu de bleu, dame, vous vestez vert” (“instead of blue, lady, you dress in green”). Machaut’s *Livre dou Voir Dit* offers the same metaphor: suspecting his love, Toute Belle, of infidelity, Guillaume dreams that the image of Toute Belle, in a portrait that he keeps of her, has turned its face away from him and that its dress has turned from blue to green. This use of color to represent a lover’s behavior, where blue and green are given moralistic connotations, is also found in the work of Geoffrey Chaucer.

For example, in Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale*, Canacee finds a wounded bird that has been abandoned by her lover. Canacee builds the bird a small enclosure that she lines on the inside
with blue velvet “in signe of trouthe that is in wommen sene” (“as a sign of truth observed in
women”; line 645, emphasis added). On the outside, the enclosure is painted green with
images of “false fowles” (“false fowls”; line 647) who abandon their mates. In Chaucer’s Anelida
and Arcite, meanwhile, the cheating Arcite is described as having a “newe and grene” (“new
and green”; line 180) heart. When Arcite appears to the sorrowing Anelida in a dream to proffer
her his faithful love, he is “clad in asure” (“dressed in blue”; line 330). Further, in the lyric
Against Women Unconstant, that is attributed to Chaucer, the male speaker reproaches his lady
for her “unstedfastnesse” (line 3), adding in the refrain: “In stede of blew, thus may ye were al
grene” (“instead of blue, thus let you be dressed all in green”).

Chaucer likely derives his use of this blue-green imagery from his illustrious French
contemporary, given the latter poet’s extensive literary influence over much of Chaucer’s
corpus. As I will show, however, the two poets’ reliance on the same metaphor can illuminate
more than just vectors of literary influence. I read Machaut’s and Chaucer’s use of the blue-
green color metaphor as a joint engagement with contemporary historical developments within
heraldry that affected the closely linked courtly circles of both poets. By imagining a world in
which infidelity may be rendered externally legible through color, Machaut and Chaucer play
out the fantasy that identity may be governed by a stable text.

Offering a real-life rendition of the same fantasy, heraldry promises a clear semiotic system, in
which every member of the nobility may be readily visually identified by his or her personal
sign. The social realities of the late fourteenth century, however, failed in delivering this
promise. Machaut’s and Chaucer’s historical period saw a marked surge in people claiming
armigerous status, leading to a concomitant increase in the number of newly minted members
of the nobility who, whether intentionally or accidentally, assumed coats of arms that already
had previous owners, resulting in widespread cases of mistaken chivalric identity. Lawsuits over
one’s original right to a coat of arms, known as armorial bearings disputes, were brought before
judges so often in the second half of the fourteenth century that special courts emerged
specifically to handle this burgeoning area of jurisprudence. Chaucer himself was a witness in
one of the longest and most famous of such cases, Scrope v. Grosvenor (1385–91).

I argue that Machaut’s and Chaucer’s use of this strange color metaphor to explore issues
surrounding the legibility of identity responds to the contemporary phenomenon of late
medieval armorial bearings disputes, in which public personal identity was critically dependent
on a semiotic text in crisis. The first part of this piece reads Chaucer’s testimony in Scrope v.
Grosvenor—delivered by Chaucer in French—in order to show that Machaut’s and Chaucer’s
shared late medieval aristocratic culture understood identity to be constituted through social
reputation in the eyes of the law. I thus reveal a new, historical context for understanding the
two poets’ focus on fame and authorial reputation in their work. The latter part of the piece examines contemporary legal treatises about this type of juridical proceeding. Demonstrating how these treatises explicitly link armorial bearings disputes to nascent intellectual property rights, I show that, for Machaut specifically, the blue-green color metaphor figures concerns surrounding the ability to have personal control over one’s authorial reputation. Meanwhile, Chaucer’s reliance on heraldic imagery in another key work, *The House of Fame*, reveals that he, too, draws on the historical connection between armorial bearings disputes and intellectual property rights in order to express his own anxieties over the establishment of vernacular authorial identity in the late medieval period.

“Coloring Fidelity”

Machaut and Chaucer both imagine a lover’s infidelity as capable of leaving a discernible, if frustratingly unstable, marking on the physical body. In the *Squire’s Tale*, the lovelorn falcon, who has been abandoned by her unfaithful mate, explains to Canacee that “depe in greyn he dyed his coloures” (“deep in a fast dye he disguised his colors”; line 511). She further describes him as having perfectly painted and arranged “as wel his words as his countenance” (“his words as much as his face”; line 561). By masking his true colors through paint and dye, the unfaithful mate renders himself illegible as a potential adulterer. Moved by the falcon’s suffering, Canacee commissions her servants to create a small enclosure, blue on the inside and green on the outside, to house the wounded bird. By literally keeping green infidelity outside of the blue safe space of healing, Canacee’s decorating schema seeks to redress the semiotic crisis produced by the false male bird, whose fake paint has veiled his true identity. The falcon’s enclosure represents a miniaturized ideal world in which signs have clear meanings that are spatially codified in relation to each other.  

Like the unfaithful partner who conceals his true self by means of false outward appearance, Arcite also hides his true colors in *Anelida and Arcite*, for Anelida, of course, cannot physically see the green perfidy of Arcite’s heart. Arcite’s pledge of faithful love is at one point visually confirmed by his external appearance, when he appears before Anelida to ask her for a second chance, “clad in asure” (“dressed in blue”; line 330) as if in token of his newfound fidelity. This brief moment, however, in which the external sign seems just about to deliver on its promised meaning, takes place within a dream. Arcite’s behavior can thus only be guaranteed by his external appearance within the space of Anelida’s reverie; in real life, the outward sign is revealed to be always at least potentially misrepresenting the lover’s true nature.

If Chaucer can at least conceive of a space, however remote and contingent, in which infidelity could be found out by means of its green color and in which the color blue could serve as a testament to fidelity, Machaut’s *Voir Dit* seems even more determined to expose any moment
of semiotic success as purely illusory. Guillaume suspects his lady, Toute Belle, of infidelity and dreams that her portrait has changed colors from blue to green. Guillaume’s subsequent attempts to ascertain whether his dream can be taken as sure proof of his lady’s infidelity, however, result in a breakdown of all possible modes of authoritative discourse with significant ramifications for the rest of the narrative. After observing the portrait change its color from blue to green, Guillaume, still within his dream, leaves the room with the portrait and finds himself in a garden where a group of courtiers play a game called Roi-qui-ne-ment (literally, “the King Who Does Not Lie”), in which they address requests to a wreathed man, never identified by name, sitting elevated from the rest of the group. When Guillaume’s turn to play comes, he explains his strange experience with the color-changing portrait and asks the “king” how he should interpret such a metamorphosis. In response, the “king” questions everything that Guillaume has said and offers no clear answers (lines 5605–10):

. . . Biaus amis cest grant nicete
Dou penser · car il le te samble
Tu dors · et paroles ensemblé
Et si mest avis que tu songes
On ne doit pas croire ses songes

Sweet friend, it’s great foolishness
To have such a thought, for, so it seems to you,
You’re sleeping and talking at the same time.
You’re dreaming, such is my view,
And no one should believe his dreams.7

The “king” goes on to doubt whether such metamorphoses are even possible and warns Guillaume against making false accusations (lines 5611–16). He concludes by suggesting that Guillaume is either experiencing an attack of melancholy that is causing him to imagine things or else perhaps that it is Guillaume who is being unfaithful and telling lies about the portrait’s color change (lines 5691–92).

Every element in this scene contributes to the thorough destabilization of both characters’ attempts at authoritative discourse. The testimony of Guillaume’s personal experience is instantly discredited: the event itself—namely, the portrait’s color change—is deemed improbable, and he is generally judged to be fundamentally misrepresenting the facts of what has happened, at best seeing what is not there and at worst giving false witness. He is even told—within his own dream—that he is dreaming. The persona rendering this judgment, however, is hardly in any authoritative position himself. This “king” is an unnamed figure existing within the suspended world of the interpolated dream vision. Whatever authority he might have within this dream world is a priori put to question by the circumscribed space of the Roi-qui-ne-ment game, within which and only within which he has acquired his authoritative position. Whatever judgment the “king” is passing on Guillaume’s testimony, it is coming from a place of contingent, ephemeral authority that only holds meaning within the space of game and dream. Neither Guillaume’s experience nor the judgment of this pseudo-sovereign can provide
us with a satisfactory answer as to what the portrait’s color change symbolizes and whether, even, it has actually taken place.

As readers, we likewise never learn the truth of what this portrait’s metamorphosis really signifies, if anything. When Guillaume wakes up and looks at the portrait again, he finds Toute Belle’s image smiling, but, significantly, Machaut says nothing concerning whether it has changed back to blue or remains green (lines 5815–20). This startling omission, after a lengthy scene devoted to the portrait’s color change, emphasizes the image’s failure to produce legible meaning, whether to its owner or to an external judge. The scene’s lack of clear resolution goes on to haunt Guillaume’s subsequent interactions with Toute Belle. Their relationship degenerates into a set of accusations of infidelity from him and unsuccessful assurances of faithful love from her that Guillaume believes briefly, only to succumb to more suspicions. Whether the portrait’s color change is actually symbolic of Toute Belle’s true behavior is never satisfactorily determined, so that the act of reading the sign fails on all possible levels. Both Chaucer and Machaut thus toy with the possibility that an external sign might be used to identify infidelity, but the success of that representation is variously thwarted in their narratives. Instead, the attempt to represent the “true self” by means of color continually ushers in crises of textual interpretation.

An earlier work by Machaut, Le Remede de Fortune, suggests that the origins of this blue-green color metaphor are rooted in contemporary heraldry, that is, in the adoption of coats of arms to signify one’s noble status. In the Remede, Esperance explains to Amant the symbolic meaning of the colors in Love’s coat of arms: the blue, she explains, stands for loyalty; red for pure love; white for joy; black for grief; yellow for falsehood; and, significantly, green again for fickleness (lines 1895–1910).8 These kinds of symbolic taxonomies for the colors on a coat of arms were a standard feature of late medieval heraldic treatises, such as Bartolo da Sassoferrato’s De insigniis et armis (written in Italy in 1357), Honore Bonet’s (or Bouvet’s) L’Arbre des batailles (French, c. 1387), and Christine de Pizan’s Livre des fais d’armes et de chevalerie (French, c. 1409), though, significantly, green is absent in all three. Johannes de Bado Aureo’s Tractatus de armis, however, written in England in circa 1394 and dedicated to Anne of Bohemia, devotes substantial space to the color green. According to Bado Aureo, green has entered heraldry ignobly “ab aliquo milite, histrione vel gaudente, qui nobiles non sunt” (“from some kind of base soldier, actor or reveler; these are not noble”). Green is not to be found among traditional English coats of arms, Bado Aureo goes on to say, and thus he is ashamed even to include the color within his own taxonomy since the authors of heraldic treatises before him have considered it “absurdus” (“out of place”) and “inconveniens” (“unsuitable”).9 Bado Aureo’s association of the color with lowly, popular entertainment and impurity suggests a contemporary cultural association between green and moral laxity.10 Machaut’s and Chaucer’s
choice of green to represent the problem of infidelity thus speaks to the negative role of the color within contemporary armorial culture. A closer look at late medieval heraldry as a semiotic system for producing and confirming an individual’s identity reveals profound tensions arising within this system during the two poets’ lifetimes. These tensions suggest that the falcon’s, Anelida’s, and Guillaume’s anxieties over identity, and its capacity to signify through legible external signs, mirror a historical legal problem regarding identity in Machaut’s and Chaucer’s contemporary society.

The Origins of Armorial Bearings Disputes and Chaucer’s Testimony

Coats of arms were originally used to help differentiate feudal lords and their vassals on the battlefield, and they became individualized and hereditary among male and female members of the upper nobility by the middle of the twelfth century. In the following century, armorial bearings were spreading to the lesser landed gentry and soldiers and, by the fourteenth century, to urban populations. The idea behind the armorial bearing is deceptively simple in theory and often complex in execution. Designed as a marker of individual identity, each coat of arms must contain two key elements in order for it to function within the heraldic system: (1) it must be unique among all other coats of arms; and (2) its uniqueness must be visually recognizable. In other words, no two people, unrelated to one another, may bear the same coat of arms.

By Chaucer’s and Machaut’s time, France and England had developed armorial systems of great complexity, in which additions of special tags and borders to an individual family’s coat of arms were capable of transmitting surprisingly detailed information to the viewer. Late medieval French and English armorial bearings were able to relate the exact position of their bearer within the family’s genealogical tree: which son he was (first, second, third and so on); which son his father was; whether he (or she) was a member of the family by marriage, by inheritance, by alliance of family branches, or through the matrilineal line, and so on. Even illegitimate male offspring could, on a case by case basis, bear a family’s coat of arms with special markings signifying bastardy. Heraldry was a sophisticated semiotic system with the capacity to make detailed statements about a person’s family line, his or her position within that family line, even his or her political allegiances. It was capable of visually representing, sometimes with astounding precision, a person’s exact position within his or her society.

Over the course of the fourteenth century, however, the swelling of the merchant class sharply increased the number of people able to buy their way into the ranks of the nobility. Meanwhile, owing to the rise in military activity during the Hundred Years War, even more people acquired noble status as a reward for distinction on the battlefield. As the number of individuals with newly gained noble identities continued to grow to include the lesser gentry and the urban
bourgeoisie, the probability of assuming, even if accidentally, a preexisting coat of arms saw a proportionate increase. Starting in the end of the thirteenth century, a concerted effort to prevent this problem was made in various administrative courts across Europe: special court officers, known as heralds, were charged with logging and regularly updating extensive records of individual families’ coats of arms in documents known as armorial rolls. The armorial roll kept by the heralds of the kingdom of Navarre, for example, dated between 1386 and 1475, numbers no less than 1,264 entries. Nevertheless, two people could still end up with the same coat of arms, at which point the matter had to be taken to a court if neither party was willing to give up the armorial bearing.

In France in the late fifteenth century, for example, Jean de Maupin adopted the hereditary arms of a certain Guillaume de Drucat, a late fourteenth-century nobleman, and was challenged in a court of law by Jacques de Rambures, who claimed that he, and not Maupin, was the rightful heir to the Drucat family line (Mathieu 137). Even proximate branches of the same family could dispute each other’s rights in cases where the familial relationship itself might not be under question, but the branch’s right to armigerous status was: in the fourteenth-century English case of Grey v. Hastings, for example, both parties were descended, Hastings patrilineally and Grey matrilineally, from a common ancestor, and each claimed sole hereditary right to the arms.

Practically speaking, however, when two people wear identical coats of arms, how can one prove which one is the authentic sign and which, its perfect copy? These disputes raise the same problems that we have already seen play out in Machaut’s and Chaucer’s work: namely, the failure of the external sign to signify the “truth” about a person’s identity. Surviving records reveal that armorial bearings lawsuits could drag on for years because, given the inadmissibility of the coat of arms itself due to its compromised status as legible sign, evidence for its authenticity had to come from other places. Chaucer’s own deposition in Scrope v. Grosvenor offers an intriguing glimpse into the processes of heraldic law, revealing the circumscribed authority of individual testimony within armorial bearings disputes.

In its scrupulous language, Chaucer’s testimony reflects the same anxieties over successfully reading the external sign observable in the Squire’s Tale, Anelida and Arcite, and the Voir Dit. Chaucer begins by explaining his reasons for believing Scrope to be the rightful bearer of the disputed arms: he tells the court that when he was with the English army approaching Retters, just before he was captured and taken to Machaut’s native city of Reims in 1359, he recalls seeing Scrope bearing the arms in question, azure a bend or (“blue with a diagonal gold band”). Chaucer’s first claim, therefore, is that Scrope visibly bore these arms in an English campaign of the Hundred Years War. Chaucer’s initial means of asserting his belief in Scrope’s
right to his coat of arms is to emphasize that Scrope has displayed his arms publicly, before a large group of people, and within a significant historical moment. Chaucer is next asked to elaborate on his conviction that the azure a bend or belongs to Scrope. Chaucer responds that he has heard so from “veux chevaliers & esquiers” (“elderly knights and squires”) and that Scrope’s possession of these arms is generally known by “commune fame & publike vois” (“common fame and public voice”). In addition to the military world of the battlefield, Chaucer’s deliberate answer identifies the external community, particularly its more aged members, their age conveying implicit authority, as being the ultimate guarantors of one’s identity.

Chaucer goes on to explain that he has also seen Scrope’s arms on numerous banners, windows, paintings, and clothing. Such material evidence of the arms in public use was a major factor in armorial bearings disputes, and each side in such cases usually produced lists upon lists of relevant objects and buildings. Indeed, Scrope’s victory in the trial was owed in part to his literally having more visual repositories that demonstrated his arms, or, in Robert Barrett’s words, “[Grosvenor] could not muster the spatio-symbolic might to overcome Scrope’s own widespread topography of honor” (Barrett 143). In the absence of authoritative record, Scrope’s right to bear the azure a bend or had to be proven through both his military prowess and a social popularity so extensive as to have both geographic and temporal scope, stamped in human memory as well as on the physical world.

Deposition after deposition in these cases followed a similar framework to Chaucer’s own: witnesses relied on military experience, communal hearsay, and visual evidence, often in that very order, to authorize their personal reading of the contested coat of arms. Such witnesses could be called by the hundreds: Scrope v. Grosvenor numbered over five hundred depositions and took six years in court. Scrope ultimately won the lawsuit because he had substantially more witnesses, as well as the backing of John of Gaunt, whose own high social status helped bolster Scrope’s claim. In this way, armorial bearings disputes reveal the indelible importance of communal agreement in producing socially accepted meaning. The ultimate authority in these cases becomes the audience that can, speaking in unison, guarantee one’s personal identity, and judgment is accorded based on that audience’s numbers and/or social elevation. The resolution of Scrope v. Grosvenor thus depended on the sheer number of people that were able, by means of the same kinds of rhetorical strategies used by Chaucer in his testimony, to assert their reading of what an azure a bend or signifies, tilting the scales into Scrope’s favor with the combined weight of their textual interpretation.

That the authorization of armorial identity is dependent on a process of public recognition was understood and further theorized in the legal writings produced during Machaut’s and
Chaucer’s lifetimes. In his famous treatise *De insigniis et armis*, written in 1357, extant in over one hundred manuscript copies and first printed as early as 1472, the aforementioned Bartolo da Sassoferrato, himself a canon lawyer from Rome, explicitly addresses this close relationship between the bearing of identical arms and the opinion of the public:

> . . . signum quod portat unus et signum quod portat alius non est unum et idem, immo sunt diversa, habentia omnimodam similitudinem. Ad decisionem ergo predictorum premitto: primo, quod ille cuius signum alii portant prohibere, seu petere ut prohibeatur, si ille cuius est signum ex hoc iniuriatur, quia forte illud portant cum vituperio vel vituperose tractant . . .

(. . . the sign that someone bears is not really identical to the same sign borne by another; rather, they are different, although they might appear to be alike. Therefore, concerning the initial question, I say first that one can prohibit, or seek to prohibit another from using his sign, if he is injured by it because the other party bears the coat of arms with contempt or treats it shamefully.) (Lines 65–70, emphasis added)²⁴

Bartolo goes on to say that a third party may also lodge a complaint against two people who bear identical arms, if the existence of the two identical arms harms him or her (lines 71–76). He further notes that a judge may prohibit the use of identical arms in case of “scandalum . . . et deceptionem subiectorum” (“scandal and confusion among the subjects”; lines 77–78).

Here Bartolo wrestles with a curious paradox that we have just seen play out in *Scrope v. Grosvenor*: two identical coats of arms may look like perfect copies of the same image to the public, but because they are borne by different people, they represent two distinct identities and are thus, despite being visually indistinguishable, two *different* signs. This difference is, however, essentially metaphysical: it is only visible to their bearers and completely lost on the public, who sees only one material sign and will therefore read it either one way or the other, depending on which of the two people it knows better. Thus, even though the two seemingly identical coats of arms are actually different, one must be eliminated because the public cannot perceive this difference.

If, however, the public does not regularly encounter the two identical signs, then having matching coats of arms *does not* demand prosecution. Bartolo cites, as an example, the case of a German who met a man in Rome with the same coat of arms as his own and wanted to take
him to court. As long as the two parties reside in geographically separate regions, Bartolo explains, this case would be dismissed (lines 82–91). Identical armorial bearings are only a problem if the two people reside in the same place and, hence, offer competing readings to one and the same public. Bartolo’s injunctions are taken up even more vigorously by Honore Bonet in his aforementioned heraldic treatise, *L’Arbre des batailles* from circa 1387, which decries the man that assumes the arms of another as a “faulsaire” (“forger”; 237). Bonet further argues that if one has adopted arms “publiquement” (“publicly”), then all other people, unrelated to him or her by blood, must be prevented from using the same sign (239).

Chaucer concludes his testimony with a personal anecdote that powerfully depicts the disconcerting effects of having two identical armorial bearings circulating before the same audience. He recounts a stroll through London that brings him to a tavern bearing, on its facade, the *azure a bend or*. Chaucer says that he asked who had painted “cestez armes du Scrope” (“these arms of Scrope”) and that “un autre” (“someone”) proceeded to inform him that these were the arms of Grosvenor, which had been the first time, Chaucer tells the court, he had ever heard of anybody by that name. In addition to making an interesting statement about his own urbanite identity, Chaucer’s inclusion of this detail stages an unsettling moment of defamiliarization that points to some of the deeper issues behind these disputes. The known cypher, *azure a bend or*, left behind in foreign lands, has suddenly bloomed in an intimate corner of Chaucer’s home territory. Despite the new context, Chaucer links the coat of arms before him to a memory of his wartime experience on the French battlefield, asking not why “cestez armes” (“these arms”) are here, but why “cestez armes du Scrope” are here. But his reading is dismissed as incorrect and another, alien reading is offered in return. Chaucer’s memory of the symbolic meaning of the *azure a bend or*, recalled from his military past, is judged mistaken by the authority of the figure of the autre, a figure whom Chaucer at no point names or describes in the deposition. (Innkeeper? Passerby? We never learn the answer.)

In this brief moment, the whole careful structure of Chaucer’s testimony—the experience of the battlefield, the knowledge won from oldtimers—is exposed for all of its fragile subjectivity because that autre has a completely alternate reading of the same sign. Chaucer’s encounter in the London street with this unidentified second witness thus echoes the uncanny dream vision scene between Guillaume and the mysterious wreathed figure of the Roi-qui-ne-ment game, a figure that, we recall, is likewise never named or identified. Like Chaucer, Guillaume attempts to read a heraldic symbol but is doubted in all aspects of his interpretation by an enigmatic personage whose unconvincing authority only exists within the artificial structure of the game-within-a-dream. Just as Machaut’s dream “king” cannot offer a definitive judgment as to what Guillaume saw, so, too, Chaucer’s autre could only supply one conflicting reading to
Chaucer’s own, leaving them both at an interpretive impasse that only hundreds more witnesses within that court of law were able to resolve.

By representing fidelity and infidelity by means of heraldic colors, Machaut and Chaucer disassemble, on a small scale, the same fantasy that lawsuits like Scrope v. Grosvenor expose: that an external sign can ever unambiguously represent a person's identity. To know whether or not one’s lover is faithful is, as Chaucer’s and Machaut’s use of colors suggests, an issue of textual legibility: is one correctly reading the visible signs of the lover’s behavior, or is one, like the falcon, or Anelida, or Guillaume, performing a poor reading of the text? More important, how can one be sure of the text’s correct interpretation? Chaucer’s failed reading of the coat of arms painted in the London street reveals that the individual interpretation of the external sign is only valuable when amalgamated with other, similar readings that, together, form a communal acceptance of the sign; by itself, the individual reading has no power, as the Voir Dit itself illustrates.

Guillaume is never able to shake the effects of his dream about the portrait’s color change; for the rest of the Voir Dit, he becomes increasingly paranoid that Toute Belle is being unfaithful to him, and his suspicions only grow stronger despite all of her assurances to the contrary. By the end of the work, their whole relationship has dissolved into a bitter exchange of “he said-she said” with no resolution because there is no outside community to support either party’s claim as to whether Toute Belle is being faithful or unfaithful. In their coloring of fidelity, Chaucer and Machaut underscore the full significance of an individual’s social reputation in the late medieval period: as armorial bearings disputes make manifest, an individual’s identity was entirely legally dependent on his or her social reputation, which guaranteed the public’s recognition of that identity.

The Armorial Bearing and Vernacular Authorial Identity

As Chaucer’s testimony and Bartolo’s and Bonet’s treatises have shown, aristocratic identity in the late fourteenth century was, first and foremost, understood as the signified of an ideally stable external sign. If the audience was unable to agree on the meaning of that sign, then the link between signifier and signified was severed, and identity could no longer be confirmed. In what remains, I will demonstrate the close relationship for Machaut between this notion of identity formation as a process of textual reception, derived from contemporary heraldic law, and Machaut’s own concerns over the vernacular poet’s ability to control his own authorial identity, concerns further echoed by Chaucer.
Machaut directly links the threat of Toute Belle’s potential infidelity to larger anxieties over authorship in the *Voir Dit*. Guillaume’s distrust of Toute Belle does not stop at fears over her sexual unfaithfulness: by the end of the work, he is accusing her of a different charge that draws on the structure of his earlier suspicions to claim that she is being not sexually, but *textually* unfaithful to him. This association between the two crimes—between sexual and textual betrayal—is readily signaled in a letter that Guillaume writes Toute Belle immediately after his dream vision. In this letter (L31), he recounts to her his dream about her portrait’s color change and expresses fears over whether or not she is still true to him. This letter marks the first of the numerous instances in which Guillaume airs his suspicions over Toute Belle’s potential infidelity to him, yet he suddenly concludes the letter on what initially seems like an unrelated topic. Guillaume abruptly tells Toute Belle that he is returning to her a little box containing some works that she has written; Toute Belle has, previously in the text, sent Guillaume some of her poetry for him to make personal copies of her work.

Toute Belle is likewise careful to restore literary texts to their rightful owner. In her response, and immediately after she addresses Guillaume’s accusations over her *sexual* infidelity for the first time in the *Voir Dit*, Toute Belle also abruptly turns to the matter of the little box, writing (L32):

> Jay trouve en la laiette que vous mavies envoie unes lettres clauses qui aloient a vous · si les ouvri pour ce que ie ne savoie pour quoy vous les avies envoies · et trouvay que cestoit une balade que on vous envooiit · si la vous renvoie pour ce que ie pense que vous ne la veistes oncques · car elle est encore toute sellee ·

(In the container you sent me I found a sealed letter intended for you, and I opened it because I knew not why you sent it along, and I found that it was a ballad someone had sent you. So I am sending this back because I believe you have never looked at it, for it is still sealed.)

Toute Belle has noticed an unfamiliar text mixed in with her lyrics that Guillaume has sent back to her; realizing that it is intended for Guillaume’s eyes, she scrupulously returns it. Both Guillaume and Toute Belle are thus equally careful about restoring texts that do not belong to them. That this discussion over returning texts to their proper owners—both their proper authors and their proper readers—should occur within the same exchange in which Guillaume *first* accuses Toute Belle of being unfaithful, hints at the possibility of a link between these two concerns.
That link is made wholly explicit by the end of the Voir Dit. Guillaume accuses Toute Belle yet again, but this time of a very different crime:

. . . un riches homs qui est tresbien mes sires et mes amis ma dit et pour certein que vous moustrez a chascun tout ce que ie vous envoie · dont il samble a plusieurs que ce soit une moquerie · si en faites vostre volent · Mais iay bien aucune fois estet en tel lieu comment que ie vaille po que on ne faisoit mie einsi · et que cils qui miex savoit celer ou celle · cestoit li plus dignes de guerredon ·

(. . . a powerful man who is very much my lord and friend has told me for certain that you show every man what I send you, and so this seems a joke to many. Do what you want in this regard, but though I am little worthy, I have been many times in places where this kind of thing wasn’t done, where the man—or woman—who could best dissemble was the one most worthy of reward.) (L42)

In this passage Guillaume’s allegation is not centered on Toute Belle’s sexual infidelity for once, but, rather, on her lack of respect for his evident desire to keep his work out of the public eye. The detail that Guillaume has acquired the information about Toute Belle’s reprehensible actions from “un riches homs” (“a powerful man”), who is Guillaume’s lord and friend, implicitly authorizes this report as more than mere gossip, since the man is evidently of high social stature.

Guillaume’s stress on the public nature of Toute Belle’s shameful behavior, so flagrant as to be known to this respectable personage, is couched in the moralistic overtones of a sex scandal as he reminds Toute Belle that her behavior is aberrant in his opinion and ought to be concealed. Guillaume presses on:

Je vous envoie ce que iay fait de puis de vostre livre · si le poez monstrer a qui quil vous plaist · car par ma foy · ie mettoie grant peinne au faire · Et comment que vous teingnies que se soit moquerie · par mame il na mie .iij. personnes au monde pour qui ie lentreprenisses a faire . . .

(I am sending you what more I composed on your book, and you can show it to whomever you please, for by my faith, I took great pains in its making. And although you consider it a joke, by my soul
If the initial suspicion has been that Toute Belle is promiscuous with her body, then the new charge is that she is being promiscuous with his work, and these two types of infidelity fold directly into each other.\textsuperscript{28} To be dressed in green, it turns out by the end of the \textit{Voir Dit}, is to circulate another’s literary property unlawfully to the public. In such a way, female infidelity has become entwined for Machaut with concerns over unlicensed manuscript circulation, and this link has been ushered into the text by the disreputable associations with the color green found in contemporary heraldic treatises.

Machaut’s treatment of Guillaume’s desire for control over his manuscripts resonates with what we have been able to glean of Machaut’s own attitude toward copies of his work. The large number of luxurious manuscripts containing Machaut’s entire collected literary output, produced both during his own lifetime and immediately after his death, has long suggested to scholars the possibility that Machaut was personally supervising the production and circulation of manuscript copies of his own texts. The firmest evidence to support this hypothesis is the presence in one of these manuscripts—Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale, ff. 1584, copied in the 1370s when Machaut was still alive—of an index headed by the line “Vesci l’ordenance que G. de Machaut wet qu’il ait en son livre” (“here is the order that G. de Machaut wants there to be in his book”).\textsuperscript{29}

Despite the negative connotations associated with the color green in late medieval culture, Machaut’s conflation of Toute Belle’s potential sexual infidelity with her textual infidelity continues to seem somewhat incongruous. A glance back at Bartolo’s heraldic treatise, however, sheds light on this unexpected juxtaposition as having been historically conditioned for Machaut by the phenomenon of the armorial bearings dispute itself. Immediately after describing the need to prohibit identical armorial bearings, Bartolo turns to a discussion of other types of visual markers of identity, which, he points out, require similar kinds of legal protection:

\begin{quote}
Ponamus exemplum in aliis signis quam in hiis que portantur pro armis. Pone quendam fabrum doctissimum, qui in gladiis et aliis suis operibus facit certa signa, ex quibus opus huius magistri esse dignoscitur, et ex hoc tales merces melius venduntur et avidius emuntur.
\end{quote}

(Let us provide an example of insignia other than those which are borne for coats of arms. Suppose that there is a very skilled craftsman—a smith—who
places certain marks on his swords and other products he makes, by which one recognizes that those products are made by that master. And therefore such merchandise sells well and is in high demand.) (Lines 103–7)

Bartolo posits a direct relation between the issue of identical armorial bearings and other kinds of identity markers, namely the individual sign borne by the artisan who wishes to identify his craft by a publicly recognizable symbol, or the early instantiation of what we might now call a *trademark*.

Bartolo transfers his argument concerning identical coats of arms wholesale to this different type of external sign, writing:

> Posito quod alius faceret tale signum posset prohiberi, quia ex hoc populus decipitur: accipitur anim opus unius magistri pro opere alterius... . .

(In this case I think that if another smith uses the same mark, he can be prohibited [from doing so] because when the work of one is in fact taken as the work of another, it damages the people.) (Lines 107–9)

This formulation harks back to Bartolo’s statement about prohibiting indistinguishable armorial bearings: like duplicate coats of arms, identical trademarks are damaging for the artist or craftsman wishing to lay claim to his or her work. They are equally damaging to the public that will not be able to interpret the trademark as a successful signifier and may therefore purchase the wrong product. Bonet follows Bartolo in making this same close association between heraldry and the trademark, whereby he also argues that using another craftsman’s mark should be, just like taking another’s coat of arms, punishable by law (205). Within Machaut’s (and Chaucer’s) own lifetime, heraldic law was coming to be used to manage the legal protection of products of labor, in which the artist’s or craftsman’s external sign of his or her identity was understood to function exactly like a coat of arms within aristocratic culture.

It therefore comes as no surprise that both Guillaume and Toute Belle are mutually concerned with preserving each other’s literary property by neither reading nor keeping each other’s texts. It is further unsurprising that Guillaume’s original suspicions over Toute Belle’s infidelity, fueled by the changing *heraldic* colors of that perplexing portrait, fold seamlessly into suspicions over her showing his private work to others without his permission. The heraldic sign as visual marker of social identity and the artisan’s sign as visual marker of the product of his or her labor were understood by fourteenth-century authors of heraldic treatises to be part of the same complicated system ever in danger of breaking down. The meaning of these signs, as we
have seen from *Scrope v. Grosvenor*, was construed and authorized by the public, when it recognized a sign as indicating a particular individual or family—or artisan’s workshop.

The need for obtaining public recognition for one’s sign thus invests that public with tremendous power in making or breaking a person’s claim to his or her identity, whether he or she is a member of the nobility or, Bartolo makes clear for us, an artist or craftsman. Grosvenor, we recall, also had scores of witnesses to bolster his claim to the azure a bend or, but he still lost the case because his audience was fewer in number and lower in social stature than that of Scrope. Guillaume’s overwhelming anxiety, that Toute Belle has been publicly circulating his work without his permission, points to Machaut’s understanding that late medieval chivalric—and artistic—identity is entirely dependent on public reception. If Guillaume cannot control the appearance and presentation of his text before the public, he can no longer control his own authorial identity, just like the nobleman when he cannot control the appearance and presentation of his sign, that is, his coat of arms. Machaut thus dresses his unfaithful lovers in green in order to gesture to the fantasy that identity can be unambiguously signified by a stable external sign, when, in reality, the artist, like the nobleman, is always at risk of owning a sign that will fail to represent him.

Chaucer does not link the blue-green color metaphor to ownership of his own manuscripts in as direct a manner, but his reference to armorial culture in another key work, *The House of Fame*, suggests that he, too, is drawing on the relationship in contemporary law between the armorial bearings dispute and emergent notions of intellectual property rights. In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer’s protagonist Geffrey—who is, like Guillaume, a figure for the poet Geoffrey Chaucer himself—comes to Fame’s court. Here he encounters enthroned Fame, allegorized as a female sovereign, who is bestowing fame or infamy to the vernacular poets who come before her, as busts of famous poets from antiquity look down from literally foundational pillars that support the architectural space. Fame’s authorization of vernacular poets as canonical is absolute and yet pointedly arbitrary: some request fame and receive it, some request fame and get infamy, some request infamy and obtain fame, with Fame herself never explicating her decision process and the poets never afforded any opportunity to argue their cases (3.1534–48).

In addition to the busts from antiquity that ring the scene as monuments to literary history, Fame’s arbitrary process of conferring artistic reputation is also literally framed by one other group. As Geffrey approaches the threshold to Fame’s hall, he encounters a crowd of people, streaming from its interior, who are announcing Fame’s presence. As he looks at them more closely, Geffrey realizes who these people are:
Geffrey goes on to marvel at the diversity of the coats of arms before him, each different from the last; one could, he reports, collect all the images of these armorial bearings into “a bible / twenty foot thykke” (“a tome twenty feet thick”; 3.1334–35). Stationed at the foot of Fame’s hall, these heraldic officers—the same ones who, historically, were charged with keeping records of existing armorial devices to ensure no duplication—are, in Chaucer’s vision, Fame’s personal custodians. These men’s own heraldic devices function, we note, perfectly: each herald bears his own set of arms, none of which are “yliche” (“alike”) in an idealized vision of the kind of perfect semiotic clarity that Canacee envisages for the decoration of the falcon’s enclosure and that Anelida imagines in her dream of a faithful Arcite. The vernacular poets awaiting Fame’s judgment, meanwhile, are presented as the diametric opposite of these figures, for, once in the hall, Geffrey sees before him an undifferentiated throng of versificators, gathered in as many numbers, he says, as there are rooks’ nests on trees (3.1515–16), each impossible to tell from the other.

While Machaut had used the female body to associate his coloring of fidelity, taken from heraldry, with the issue of controlling his authorial reputation, Chaucer articulates the same idea through a spatialized allegorical representation. He physically situates the anonymous crowd of poets, each awaiting audience with Fame, in a subordinate position before the officers that historically ensured the proper functioning of the armorial system and that are here also the officers of Fame’s court. In contrast to the anonymous, uniform vernacular poets, moreover, these officers are themselves successful heraldic subjects, each vibrantly differentiated by his lavish and unique armorial bearing. By physically placing these two groups within a hierarchical relationship to one another, Chaucer is, like Machaut, using heraldry to illustrate the complete dependence of late medieval chivalric—and authorial—identity on the bearing of a publicly legible external sign. Just as Scrope’s individual claim to his right to bear the azure a bend or means nothing unless it is upheld by “commune fame & publike vois,” so too, the vernacular poet’s individual claim to authorship and authority is meaningless without the fame that plucks him from the crowd.
As Geffrey watches Fame’s merciless plucking of the poets who plead their cases before her, he has the following exchange with a person standing next to him:

“Frend, what is thy name?
Artow come hider to han fame?”
“Nay, for soote, frend,” quod y,
“I cam nought hider, graunt mercy,
For no such cause, by my hed!
Sufficeth me, as I were ded,
That no wight have my name in honde.
I wot myself how best I stonde . . .” (3.1871–78)

“Friend, what is your name?
Have you come here to receive fame?”
“No, in truth, friend,” I said,
“I do not come here, God have mercy,
For no such cause, by my head!
It would be fine with me, even were I dead,
That no man have my name on hand.
I know myself how best I stand . . .”

In his answer, Geffrey vehemently refuses any part in the proceedings transpiring before him, rejecting both the allure of Fame’s canonization and, more important, his interlocutor’s request that he reveal his name. Placed in the context of this larger scene, with its watchful heralds, Geffrey’s detachment emerges as a powerful act of authorial self-protection: he willingly cloaks himself in the anonymity that the other poets are desperately trying to cast off. By so doing, he denies his interlocutor any opportunity to perform that process of public identity recognition because, as his response itself explains and our whole discussion of contemporary heraldic law has illustrated, to release one’s identity to the public is to live with the danger of its being misread and misinterpreted.

For Chaucer, just as for Machaut, privacy becomes the only means of protecting authorial identity in a social world that, increasingly over the course of the later fourteenth century, conceived of identity as dependent on a public’s interpretation of a fundamentally fallible external sign. As their use of blue-green color imagery reveals, Chaucer and Machaut were responding to a contemporary issue concerning the public reception of identity that affected them both as members of a shared courtly society, with a shared language, a shared armigerous culture, and, as we have seen here, a shared set of concerns over the emergence and development of a vernacular poetics.

Notes
My deepest gratitude to David Wallace, Emily Steiner, and Kara Gaston for their thoughtful feedback on earlier drafts of this piece.

Unless otherwise noted, English translations are my own.
References

1Ballade 248 in Machaut, *Poésies* 218. On this lyric as a source for *Against Women Unconstant*, see Wimsatt, “Guillaume de Machaut” 83–84; Wimsatt takes *Against Women* as definitively written by Chaucer.

2Quotations from Chaucer taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

3See, in particular, Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love-Poets* and *Chaucer and His French Contemporaries* and Calin; see further Butterfield, *Familiar*.

4Cf. in relation to the falcon’s longing for a stable sign, Fyler’s reading of the tale as an unsuccessful attempt to domesticate the outlandish and uncanny.

5On the importance of the *Voir Dit* as a vehicle for Machaut’s presentation of his authorial self, see, in particular, Brownlee; Cerquiglini-Toulet, “Un engin si soutil” and *Guillaume de Machaut*; and McGrady.

6On this courtly pastime and its literary representations, see Green.

7Quotations from Machaut, *Le Livre dou Voir Dit*.

8Quotation from Machaut, *Le Jugement*. Intriguingly, in one of the manuscripts containing Machaut’s collected works, Paris, Bibliotheque Nationale, ff 9221, owned by Machaut’s patron John, Duke of Berry, the title of the *Remede* is, uniquely, rendered as “Ecu Bleu” [The Blue Shield]: see further McGrady 85.

9Bado Aureo, text edited in Jones 95–212; quotations all from p. 99.

10Pastoureau observes that green and yellow were typically worn by fools and court jesters in the medieval European royal courts: see “Un couleur en mutation” and “Formes et couleur,” 66–67. On green as an ignominious color in heraldry, cf. Brault 32.

11For the classic studies, see Brault; Wagner; Denys; Keen, *Chivalry and Origins*; and Pastoureau, *Traité*.

12Mathieu, esp. 98–116, and Keen, *Chivalry*, esp. 134–43. For heraldry’s political and propagandistic uses, see Ailes 88–92; see also Coss.

13For a thoughtful analysis of heraldry and blazonry (the verbal description of a coat of arms) as a complex semiotic system with its own “grammar,” see Ragen.

14My argument is informed by Patterson’s excellent discussion on 179–86 of the ways in which the anxiety over bearing identical arms was also, at its core, a conservative reaction to the increasing social mobility of the fourteenth century that allowed more people to claim noble status.

15See Wagner 25–82, and for the rolls esp., 46–55; also Paravicini for a bibliographic overview of scholarship on the rise of heralds across Western Europe, and, for the role of the herald in England, Armstrong.

16See Mathieu 133–42; Wagner 12–24; Squibb, esp. 1–28; and Keen, “Jurisdiction.”

17On this and other English cases, see Keen, “English Military Experience,” and Ayton.

The full transcript of the court proceedings was edited by Nicholas, hereafter cited as S&G in the notes; Chaucer’s testimony was separately edited in Crow and Olson 370–74. For an overview of the case, see Stewart-Brown.

Interestingly, Chaucer was captured and taken to Reims at the exact same time that Machaut was conscripted to defend the city’s walls against advancing English offensives: Wimsatt, *Contemporaries* 78–84.

All citations from S&G 1.178–79. I have silently filled out abbreviations.

See, e.g., the lengthy list of buildings in one witness’s testimony in S&G 1.222–26.

On Gaunt, see, in particular, Walker; Goodman; and Yeager. Interestingly, John of Gaunt’s deposition in *Scrope v. Grosvenor* reveals that Scrope had previously been involved in a similar dispute over his arms with a certain Carminow, in which Gaunt was also a witness. It was concluded, as Gaunt relates in his deposition, that Carminow’s family line had borne the arms since the age of King Arthur and that Scrope’s family had borne the same since the age of William the Conqueror, and thus the judgment was that both parties could wear the arms. Clearly, in this case, about which we know only from Gaunt’s testimony, the injunctions against bearing identical arms were, for whatever reason, circumvented, perhaps due to both parties’ claims to lengthy lineages stemming from a mythical and valorized past? See S&G 2.165.

Text edited by Cavallar, 1–92; for a detailed overview of Bartolo’s life and an extensive bibliography, see introduction in same.

Text edited in Bonet.

Rosenthal notes on 93 that Chaucer is the only one of the hundreds of witnesses to make reference to an urban, rather than military or ecclesiastical, context; see also Paul Strohm’s brief discussion of this moment in 5–7, and Butterfield, “Chaucerian Vernaculars.”

Cf., e.g., a surviving record of the judgment rendered in a different case, *Aton v. Boynton*, which says only that the judge in the dispute made his decision “par bonne deliberation” (“through good deliberation”) and omits any more concrete reasons for the basis on which the judgment was awarded: see Ellis.

Cf. McGrady’s argument that Toute Belle cheats on Guillaume not as a woman, but as a reader, and that Guillaume’s anxieties over her behavior are an attempt to control his reading public: 58–61, 73–74.

On the question of Machaut’s supervision of his manuscripts, see, in particular, Williams, “An Author’s Role,” and “Machaut’s Self-Awareness”; Bent; Kibler and Wimsatt; Earp; and McGrady.

For a thorough account of the role of fame in the antique literary tradition, the scholastics and Chaucer’s own Italian contemporaries and those sources’ relation to Chaucer’s text, see Boitani.
Delany makes the interesting suggestion on 91–92 that Chaucer’s insistence on the costliness of the heralds’ attire, in their role as Fame’s officers, suggests that fame is something that can be bought, further emphasizing fame’s contingency.

Works Cited


