
H-France Review Vol. 2 (February, 2002), No. . 23

Françoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane, *Dress in the Middle Ages*. Translated by Caroline Beamish. New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1997. vi + 167 pp. Foreword, black-and-white illustrations, bibliography, and glossary. \$25.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-300-06906-5; \$15.00 US (pb.). ISBN 0-300-08691-1.

Review by Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak, University of Maryland, College Park.

The elegant translation from the French of the book here under review would have been tarnished had the title been rendered literally. *Se vêtir au Moyen Age* means "To get Dressed in the Middle Ages" or "To Put on Clothes" or simply "To Dress." At any rate, the emphasis is on the act of clothing oneself, and therefore on the manifold relationship between dress and people. The authors were not interested in producing a mere catalogue of those fabrics and garbs that can be documented in the West from the Carolingian period (ninth century) onward to the fifteenth century. Their approach consists in following medieval garments from their antecedent materials through their creation and their acquisition, considering along the way the sociological factors that organized their typology, the fashions which governed their style, and their significance in the context of a semiotics of appearance. A survey with the pithiness of an essay, *Dress in the Middle Ages* offers a comprehensive but lucid state of research currently being conducted on clothing even as it advances a stimulating agenda for the larger cultural history of dressing.

The history of clothing, cultural or otherwise, has a complicated heuristic. The available evidence, whether iconographic, textual, or material, is constrained by unavoidable bias. Iconography is primarily masculine and privileges representations of the great and the powerful, virtually leaving out the overwhelming majority of the population: women, children, peasants, and small townfolk. Further, images tend to anachronism, stereotype, codification, simplification, and stylization. Literary texts, chronicles, regulations and sumptuary laws, account books, inventories, and testaments all contain invaluable descriptions of clothing, but these can distort reality in order to serve the demands of a genre or the claims of ideology, politics, and morals. Original material evidence is scarce, usually discovered in the tombs of the upper classes. Moreover, when considered together, images, texts, and garments are hard to reconcile. Clothes uncovered by archeology rarely match the visual evidence offered by illuminated manuscripts, and the names of specific articles of dress are inconsistent in Latin, in the vernaculars, and in varying regions. It seems, however, that despite such impediments, the source materials, which are abundant enough from the thirteenth century onward to warrant a sustained approach to the study of medieval costume, are now being revisited in order to extend our understand of the sartorial culture of the middle ages.

Although clothes were primarily made of wool throughout the medieval period, the development of trade and improvements in textile manufacture came to provide an ever greater choice of raw materials and novel products. Silk cloth was available at first through imports from the East. Then, in the thirteenth century, Spain and Italy began to manufacture and export their own silk though silk weaving did not spread north of the Alps and the Pyrenees until the end of the fifteenth century. Textiles made of vegetable fibers (cotton, hemp, linen) were generally used for undergarments, headgear, and informal clothes. Furs might be ostentatious at court but were quite practical when worn by peasants to keep

warm in winter. Shoes, belts, elegant accessories but also common working clothes were made of leather, which was strong and protective. Metals were employed chiefly in military equipment.

Clothes were manufactured objects. Their production might take place entirely at home, as was the case with the peasantry, but among gentry and urban folks cloth making was confined to underwear even though spinning and weaving constituted a major domestic and female activity. Those tailors, seamstresses, and furriers who worked for kings and princes were important personages who took orders only from their exalted clientele. Local artisans, drapers, dressmakers, cobblers, hosiers, hatmakers, embroiderers, and haberdashers, on the other hand, had enough variety in their shops for townfolk to satisfy their sartorial requirements. It seems that at all levels of the social scale, clothes were made to measure, except for shoes, headgear, gloves, belts, small items of personal adornment, and certain clerical vestments, which were available as ready-made items. Some such were even mass-produced and peddled extensively in the countryside. Significant advances in clothing manufacture gradually moved production from the domestic sphere toward the emporia of specialists and tradesmen. Throughout the middle ages, however, gift-giving played an important role in the circulation of garments.

Considered from a socio-historical perspective, virtually all medieval clothing may be traced back to the basic Frankish dress: a tunic with sleeves supplemented by a hooded short cape draped around the shoulders. Clothes worn by country folk and lesser townspeople changed only slowly and were essentially utilitarian. Underwear is attested from the fourteenth century onward, but this does not preclude earlier use. Fabric stockings (hose) became popular only in the late Middle Ages. Feet might be either bare or shod. Though clothes were of poor quality, they could be made waterproof by waxing or warmer by the addition of fur linings. In general, common people owned very few garments (often only a single tunic), which they then adapted to their particular occupations or circumstances. They might add gloves, an apron, or a special belt as required, but they typically worked in their ordinary clothes and compensated for the absence of pockets by hanging tools from the belt or carrying grain and seeds in the apron.

The warrior class of north-western Europe retained the Frankish dress until the eleventh century, when it adopted a longer and very full gown, probably in imitation of a Muslim fashion rather than as a reversion to the long Roman robe which had been used since late antiquity in southern regions and as ecclesiastical dress throughout Christendom. Unlike common folk, warriors sported professional gear, the armor, which they wore over tight-fitting quilted clothing called the *pourpoint* or *doublet*. By the mid-fourteenth century, doublets, now made of expensive fabric and worn with hose, had become fashionable daily attire. Indeed this, we are told, signals the beginning of fashion, which, the authors emphasize, began as a masculine phenomenon. From then on, every fifty years or so, fashionable innovations dictated such alterations in male sartorial appearance as lengthened cloaks, shortened sleeves, scalloped hems, the introduction of black, with changes in headgear and shoes complementing the latest silhouette and color schemes. Outer garments were subjected to the whims of fashion, while doublets and hose became firmly established as the basic elements of masculine wardrobes. The Middle Ages closed on a male taste for tightness and elongation.

Elite women played a lesser role in the diffusion of fashion, in parallel both to the relatively sedentary scope of their lives and to that subordination which characterized their status. Thus, while styles of male clothing spread throughout the western world as aristocrats developed international contacts and engaged in foreign travel, female fashions were typically governed by regional differences and more provincial. Female fashion also remained sensitive to external control; dominance over the appearance of women was so rigid that drastic modifications of the silhouette would have met with staunch opposition. The standard feminine attire consisted of several gowns of various lengths worn superimposed until the fourteenth century when then prevalent male fashion inspired female robes with close-fitted bodies and sleeves. This, however, constituted the only convergence between the two gendered poles of medieval

fashions. Generally, whereas male attire tended to free the body even while ornamenting it with sumptuous fabrics, furs, and jewels, women's garb fully covered the body and displayed colors and riches with greater moderation. It was with headgear that female clothing literally reached heights of creativity, as spherical, cylindrical, or conical (the hennin) forms projected themselves vertically into voluminous headdresses. It is ironic that, despite its simplicity as compared to the extravagance displayed by men, it was the finery of women that was violently denounced by the mendicants as harboring "the horns of the devil" (p. 128).

Medieval clothes may have varied with gender, locus, and social rank, but this does not mean that clothing passively mirrored society. Piponnier and Mane perhaps protest too much that dress reflected social position when in fact clothing was an active agent in furthering those ideas that medieval people entertained about sex, status, ethics, and margins and centers. Medieval clothes played a central role in the management of cultural templates by providing a rich and flexible language with which to articulate and negotiate organizing principles of society. Laws regulating sartorial bearings, when they appeared in the canons of the Lateran Council of 1215, were discriminatory, imposing the display of visible signs upon those groups considered to be outside the boundaries of normative society, such as Jews, Moslems, heretics, prostitutes, lepers, and sometimes beggars. Also discriminatory were the sumptuary laws promulgated from the fourteenth century onward by secular authorities. Although these laws invoked economic necessity, their main goal was to implement a strict social hierarchy, particularly the maintenance of a distinction between nobles and non-nobles.

The language of dress also gave voice to expressions of repentance (the burning of clothes condemned by preachers) and renunciation (the simple and uniform clothing of religious communities). Evidence for the role of sartorial vocabulary in heralding stages in the life cycle is mixed. Boys and girls wore similar clothes until the age of seven when they adopted the adult attire of their sex and station. Gold was forbidden to aristocratic sons not yet dubbed, but age alone seems not to have modified the princely wardrobe particularly. Similarly, the use of ceremonial garments did not necessarily characterize special events. Godparents and other members attending the baptism of an infant wore no special garment, and the infant was only enveloped in a baptismal veil. In marriage, no extraordinary clothes (apart from the exchanged wedding rings) distinguished the new couple and the members of their cortege. Mourning dress, too, was not a practice of the average person. Only elite rites of passage (dubbing to knighthood, coronations) and liturgical ceremonies involved the donning of special clothes, with liturgical vestments being far more opulent than princely clothing, at least until the fourteenth century. Outside the Christian world, Jews were enjoined to possess, if possible, special clothes reserved for the synagogue and the Sabbath alone.

Two aspects of clothing were particularly instrumental in conveying meaning: signs of recognition and colors. In the world of warriors and rulers, heraldry identified individuals with respect to lineage and to landholding. The coats of arms which frequently had been embroidered on princely clothing were replaced, however, in the mid-fourteenth century by the more personal device (*devise*) which enabled an individual to bypass the strict rules that had come to govern both the composition and the devolution of heraldic emblems. Also more tightly linked to personal biography were those badges which, pinned to a hat or to a mantle, commemorated pilgrimages and other achievements. Signs of recognition, however, whether heraldic or commemorative, categorized rather than individualized personal experience, and the authors do not stress enough the extent to which clothing encoded groupings rather than individuals. A case in point is that of retinues, wherein members of a noble's entourage or urban officials received robes (liveries) whose thematic and color evoked the leader's device.

Colors contributed much to signification both in clothing and in heraldry, and they receive sustained attention from Piponnier and Mane. It comes, therefore, as a great disappointment that the book's sixty illustrations, though accompanied by very useful comments, are uniformly reproduced in black-and-white. Undyed fabrics were cheapest and gave common dress a greyish-beige appearance. Scarlet was at

first the most prestigious color in the West. Blue became popular in twelfth-century France. The popularity of black swept over Europe in the fourteenth century. By the late middle ages, the multiple meanings of colors had been codified though not standardized, which led the authors to avoid assigning too precise a significance to color codes. Though justified, their caution was perhaps slightly exaggerated. It seems clear, for instance, that each occurrence of striped cloth they cite is associated with a negative connotation: e.g., the striped cloak and hood of the prostitute, the stripes on the costumes of jongleurs and other performers. Nevertheless, no attempt has been made to analyze the stripe as a mark of infamy similar to the signs imposed to marginal groups.

In the probing and stimulating analyses of Piponnier and Manne, medieval clothes resist a static and empirical treatment. They are made to reveal the many parameters that affected their materials, shapes, and modes of fabrication and of acquisition. Among obvious but powerful defining factors were gender, social status, ethnicity, natural and economic phenomena, climate, time, place, and age. Piponnier and Manne give each of these serious consideration while retaining a notion of their reciprocal and mutual impact. The task cannot have been easy and, though skillfully accomplished, it required a certain amount of repetition as well as the dispersion of the information pertaining to any given issue. It is unfortunate that the absence of both footnotes and of an index renders precise inquiry more difficult for the reader.

Although the authors superbly gather in a single tight and lucid closing narrative (pp. 154-56) the major points made throughout the study, they still leave many of their suggestive remarks insufficiently focused. For example, cross-dressing is mentioned as an instance of carnival activity but nowhere is related to the literary topos of the cross dressed female (of which Pope Joan is a famous but far from isolated heroine) nor to the experience of Joan of Arc. Particularly in need of a more synthetic approach is the role of the head as a prime locus of symbolism in dress. For both men and women, headgear was a sign of personal honor; its knocking was a severe offense which brought severe punishment upon the offender. Bare-headedness was enforced on prostitutes, and upon individuals making amends for their crimes. It was the head that received the clerical tonsure, the tiara that distinguished the pope from all bishops, while penitents and flagellants hid their heads under hoods. When nobles and knights, disappearing beneath the encasement of their armor, promoted heraldry to the rank of disguise, they selected the helmet as the repository of extravagant emblemata. Crests featuring exotic creatures transformed the helmet into a totemic mask. In under-emphasizing the signal role of the head in those systems of representation based upon the body, the authors left unexplored the connections between the chivalric helmet-mask and those facial masks associated with carnival and popular entertainment, and forever opposed by the Church who never tired to liken a masked face to the devil.

Dress in the Middle Ages is a challenging book which, even if it occasionally falls short of its ambitions, justifies the Talmudic saying, intriguingly quoted on p. 121, that "the glory of God is man and the glory of man is his clothing."

Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak
University of Maryland, College Park
bb54@umail.umd.edu

Copyright © 2002 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of

more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172