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Monica L. Wright, *Weaving Narrative: Clothing in Twelfth-Century French Romance*. University Park, Penn.: Penn State University Press, 2009. xi + 192. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-271-03565-9; \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-271-03565-6.

Review by Sarah-Grace Heller, The Ohio State University.

French medieval romances lavish description on clothing: coronation robes embroidered by fairies with allegories of the liberal arts, *bliants* of otherworldly ladies laced provocatively up the sides, borrowed armor which miraculously fits displaced heroes but conceals their identities. Modern readers often are confounded by the length of these descriptions and their now-obscure vestimentary lexicon. Alternatively, now that material culture and gender studies have come of age, modern readers may be, like many of their medieval counterparts, seduced and enraptured by these splendid passages. Wright's *Weaving Narrative: Clothing in Twelfth-Century French Romance* is for both types of readers. She offers strategies for effectively reading clothing in medieval romance, explaining why on earth it is there, and how it is far from mere digression or decoration. Her enthusiasm for clothing description and its role in narrative is infectious. She invites the reader to share in a textual world she finds dazzling.

The scope of the book is quite narrow, dealing with French vernacular texts dated to the end of the twelfth century, c. 1160-1200. The texts are primarily Arthurian, courtly, and arguably intended for an aristocratic audience. The book is aimed at readers familiar with the canonical romance texts of Old French Studies: the works of Chrétien de Troyes, the *lais* of Marie de France, and additionally Renaut de Bâgé's *Le Bel Inconnu*, the *romans antiques* associated with the Plantagenet court of Henry II, and the Occitan Arthurian parody *Jaufre*. In chapter one, "Romance and the Fabric of Feudal Society," Wright justifies excluding the *chansons de geste* from the study based on Eugene Vinaver's classification of the "epics" as expressions of national pride useful in wartime but not interested in chivalry, *courtoisie*, courtly love, and the material luxury of the court [1] The single *chanson de geste* discussed, the *Song of Roland*, is in many ways anomalous, as a number of recent scholars have shown; Sarah Kay's work has demonstrated that themes such as chivalry and love are as much a part of one genre as the other, and that the two are more or less contemporaneous.[2] It would be interesting to apply the book's approach to a wider selection of texts, such as some *chansons de geste* (the Guillaume d'Orange Cycle comes to mind) and romances with intertextual connections to the works of Chrétien such as the various versions of *Partonopeus de Blois*.

Several methodologies are outlined in the first chapter, including rhetorical, semiotic, fashion theory, and anthropological approaches. Wright first proposes that clothing description passages should be understood according to ancient and medieval rules of rhetoric as a type of *topoi*, places in a text where an author might exercise "inventio," amplifying places of interest in the text by drawing on source material (*ab auctore*), his or her own imagination (*de suo*), and his or her skill (*ex arte*) (pp. 12-13). A second proposed approach employs Julia Kristeva's distinction between the motivated symbol (meaning is based on a resemblance of some sort) and the arbitrary sign. Kristeva posited that the symbol dominated medieval thought through the thirteenth century [3]; Wright argues that the transition to predominant use of the arbitrary or

contingent sign begins in the twelfth century (pp. 15-17). The question of fashion is discussed briefly without major impact on later chapters, with the argument that clothing before the late twelfth century directly and transparently translated economic and political status or geographic location, making it functionally symbolic; only with the rise of fashion with its arbitrary, irrational fluctuations does a garment or accessory become a sign (pp. 17-19). Wright seems most comfortable with the more generalizing anthropological approach of Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Eicher, categorizing clothing's two main functions in a society as expressive (personal dress divulging information about beliefs, sentiments, status, etc.) and instrumental (e.g., ceremonial or occupational dress); additionally, dress plays important roles in social rituals such as weddings, coronations, investitures, and funerals (pp. 20-22). In subsequent chapters, the book leaves most discussions of theory behind to offer close readings of texts, examining how "written clothing has the potential to mediate the material reality of the world and the imagined universe of the ideal (p. 22)."

The second chapter, "Material Matters: Clothing in Changing Contexts," gives an overview of costume history and the place of clothing and textiles in twelfth-century French society and its economy. The period is characterized as one of significant shifts: expansion in trade, increased access to luxury products thanks to the crusades, tensions between the aristocratic and merchant classes. Feudal gift giving was normative, if not always the rule; tournaments were good for the economy. Some of the references in this chapter are dated, some generalizations deserve nuance. The historical reality of clothing is not really the book's focus. This is a textual study, a guide to reading clothing narrative rather than a costume and textile history.

The book is at its best in the last three chapters, which produce beautifully rendered close readings of clothing passages and analyses of how to read them in the larger context of romance construction techniques. Chapter three, "Dressing Up the Character: The Elucidation of Characters Through Clothing," shows how descriptive conventions establish character, and then how these conventions for revealing identity make disguise, the use of costume to conceal identity, an effective narrative device. The chapter begins by arguing that the literature that precedes the rise of romance tended to conceive of characters as "types," whereas romance prefers the more fluid and ambivalent process of "signification" (p. 44). No "types" from other genres are offered for contrast.<sup>[4]</sup> The portraits of the two ladies vying for the Bel Inconnu's affections are used to illustrate "normative" romance descriptive techniques: when the character first appears, the poet first describes the outer layer, the mantle, which Wright observes is reserved for noble characters. It is always in rich and colorful imported silk, lined with fur, marvelously and hyperbolically embroidered; then the matching gown, whose quality and embellishments also reflect the character's nobility.

But often this "code" is subverted, for instance when one lady appears in a mantle and chemise (an undergarment equated to nudity) to seduce the knight. In public she would be ridiculous, but in the romance context the juxtaposition of symbols is effective for seduction, as for the greater narrative structure. Chrétien's Enide is presented in ragged clothes that serve as foil for the beautiful body beneath them, as well as the character's inner worth. This subversion of the conventional process of description is interpreted as "a fissure in the wall of the impermeable representational world," one that paves the way "for other transgressions to follow" (p. 58). Further examples include the Amazon Camille in the *Roman d'Eneas*, beautiful in her armor, subversive in her gender ambivalence; and the besieged Blancheflor in *Perceval*, whose rich robes seem "wildly contradictory" to the famine in her realm. Wright argues that with these images, as well as the use of disguises, Chrétien is forcing his noble audience to realize their position is vulnerable, calling upon them to reinterpret their reality (p. 61). Were the nobles really so complacent, so assured of their position? Is there ever really a fixed code, a purely conventional romance? It could be argued that romance is always subversive, even in its earliest known

manifestations. Nobles, as a military class, ready to fight, are always threatened, one way or another. Wright's success is in calling the modern reader's attention to the fluidity of narrative uses of clothing in these romances. At times the argument that these uses represent a major change from past practices lacks support. The reading of costume passages as more than mere decoration, indeed as a means of mediating troubling realities and marvelous desires, stands as an important contribution.

Chapter four, "Clothing Acts and the Movement from Code to Signifying System," examines how romance writers and likewise their characters become expert manipulators of "the vestimentary code." Note the definite article: this chapter develops a unified classification system for what Wright terms "clothing acts," when clothing is a performative signifier in the romance structure. In all cases, it is underlined that the act must be considered in context, and narrative examples are considered. Wright's system for interpreting clothing acts is presented discursively in the text, but it may be useful to summarize it here in list form, to emphasize its uses as a code.

1. Clothing gifts (p. 81)
  - a. reaffirm social ties between groups
  - b. represent sharing wealth on state occasions or prosperous times
  - c. are bestowed in moments of changing status
  - d. amplify good leadership (p. 85)
  - e. lead recipients to reciprocate
2. Identificatory gifts (p. 87)
  - a. establish or enhance a reputation
  - b. restore a lost person to loved ones and status
  - c. are exchanged as tokens of love (p. 88)
  - d. may be taken as an insult: charity diminishes status (p. 92)
  - e. may be rejected as an insult, or inexplicably
3. Acts of dressing and undressing (pp. 94-95)
  - a. elucidate identity
  - b. mark transformations of identity
  - c. may falsify identity, forcing questioning of appearances (p. 96)
  - d. may open a sequence of events requiring reciprocation for closure (98)
  - e. may unveil expressions of feelings or commitments (p. 99)
  - f. may be a means of escape (p. 101)
4. Dressing another person
  - a. is an honoring act (p. 101)
  - b. may highlight a character's skill with cloth or clothing (p. 102)
  - c. may help overcome a lack or shortcoming (p. 103)
5. Self-dressing
  - a. helps a character reenter the world (p. 105)
  - b. communicates a character's wholeness following a difficult period
  - c. may be used preemptively to seek assistance from an authority
6. Making clothing
  - a. is traditionally associated with women (p. 109)
  - b. could be accomplished by men in professional urban industries
  - c. binds society together with the multiple processes involved
  - d. may demonstrate gender ambivalence in times of changing notions of "women's work" (p. 110)
7. Destroying clothing
  - a. indicates grief (p. 118)
  - b. indicates violence against another

The title of the final chapter, “Clothing as a Structuring, Thematic, and Narrative Device: The Art of Weaving Romance,” highlights the three main methodologies of the book overall. Here, the clothing acts of the previous chapter are considered in the broader context of how to construct—and read—a medieval romance. Wright makes much of Chrétien’s term “conjointure,” literally a stitching together, used by the author to describe how he will create his story in the prologue to *Erec et Enide* (line 14). The clothing acts have the important role of opening and closing narrative threads, opening cycles which must eventually be closed with counter-gifts (pp. 125–26). Clothing acts, such as the undressing and dressing which unleashes and then resolves the werewolf transformation in Marie de France’s *Bisclavret*, punctuate the central tension in the plot (p. 130). Clothing interacts with narrative as a structuring device both as a formal and a thematic analogy (p. 131). Literal uses of it structure the plot; authors present themselves as weavers, dyers, or stitchers, conscious that their art is modeled on those arts ranging the spectrum from humble to glorious that confer mundane identity and celebrate special occasions. If the essential structure of medieval romance is the quest, clothing functions multivalently to elaborate the quest and its themes (p. 138).

Roland Barthes, in his *Système de la mode*, both proposed that vestimentary codes existed and were worthy of semiotic analysis, and confessed that his attempt to elucidate them through analysis of fashion magazines was a failed one. The code is always changing, always elusive. Words never tell an entire garment, they only highlight key features. Words carry the fashionable or vestimentary meaning, but also resist it. By its very nature the code is ephemeral: that is, indeed, the point. [5] This highlights to degree to which Wright achieves something important in her systematic analysis of clothing’s functions in romance. The reading system she presents deserves to be applied to a broader array of texts, which will surely both validate and subvert it, as do the texts studied in this book.

## NOTES

[1] Eugene Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971), p. 1.

[2] Sarah Kay, *The Chansons de Geste in the Age of Romance: Political Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[3] Julia Kristeva, “Du symbole au signe,” in *Le texte du roman: Approche sémiologique d’une structure discursive transformationnelle* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), pp. 25–35.

[4] This brings to mind Keith Busby’s caveat that the more precisely one defines generic terms, the more resistant texts seem to the definition. “Narrative Genres,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval French Literature*, eds. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 139.

[5] Roland Barthes, *Système de la mode* (Paris: Seuil, 1967), pp. 7–29.

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