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Nicole D. Smith, *Sartorial Strategies: Outfitting Aristocrats and Fashioning Conduct in Late Medieval Literature*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. Xi + 269 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-268-04137-3

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The study of medieval clothing in literary texts is an area that has attracted increasing academic interest over the past fifteen years. This field is not limited to literary criticism, however, and fictional clothing has been considered by costume and fabric historians, archaeologists and material culture experts, as well as historians of fashion and fashion changes. Indeed, the presence of clothing in medieval texts has recently prompted publications as diverse as Andrea Denny-Brown's *Fashioning Change: The Trope of Clothing in High and Late Medieval England*, where the critic examines clothing's deployment as a trope in literary texts, to the co-edited *Encyclopaedia of Dress and Textiles in the British Isles c. 450-1450*, which collates the most up-to-date knowledge of medieval fabrics and dress.[1] Since 2005, Boydell and Brewer have also published *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, a journal dedicated to all facets of the study of medieval clothing. Much like Denny-Brown's monograph, Nicole D. Smith's book, *Sartorial Strategies: Outfitting Aristocrats and Fashioning Conduct in Late Medieval Literature*, is continuing a more literary based examination of clothing in texts, following on from such works as Sarah-Grace Heller's *Fashion in Medieval France* and Susan Crane's *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War*. [2] Smith's work adds much to such studies, exploring as it does discourses on clothing that range from penitential guides to romances. Indeed, in a field where clothing has been used as historical evidence for something that lies outside of literature itself, it is refreshing to see a literary critic remaining focused on the impact clothing can have on the contours of a text.

Smith's work straddles the dual discourses of secular romance literature, which generally uses clothing to convey wealth and aristocratic station, and religious writings, which focus on the moral implications of dress, in order to produce an original and insightful contribution to clothing studies of a literary nature. Smith shows how attentive authors can open up such narrow discourses and instead use them to point beyond conventional meanings. These seemingly oppositional discourses are shown to intersect in aristocratic dress by giving items generally associated with excess a pertinent moral function, and repeatedly linking them to the comportment of the wearer. This notion of comportment, and clothing's impact on it, is also integral to the study as a whole and is a key strand of the overall argument.

The author chooses to include both French and English texts that exemplify key aspects of her argumentation. The twelfth-, thirteenth-, and fourteenth-century texts in question are selected for their careful deployment of specific changes in fashion. These modifications range from the impact that belts, laces, and knots had upon previously loose-fitting clothing in the twelfth century, to the development of tighter silhouettes as achieved through the male *pourpoint* (doublet), an item intended to be worn underneath the innovative plate armour of the fourteenth century. Much of the originality of this work lies in the critic's argument that such items are used to point out issues related to morality and virtue, often in clear contrast with prevailing clerical attitudes to fashionable dress. The texts, Marie de France's *Guigemar*, Heldris de Cornuälle's *Roman de Silence*, the anonymous *Sir Garwain and the Green Knight*, and

Geoffrey Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*, each demonstrate a particular moment in the intersection of these discourses, ranging as they do from the twelfth to the fourteenth century.

One of the greatest successes of this work is Smith's vigilant consideration of contemporary contexts. In all chapters, a detailed contextualisation of pertinent texts or historical detail is carefully laid out before the central textual analysis is given. Such scholarly rigour adds much richness and breadth to this study of aristocratic dress. Smith's alertness to context demonstrates her ability to synthesise clothing and fashion history, literary analysis, clerical discourses, and an overall sense of related historical detail. This flexibility in turn allows Smith to pinpoint pertinent dialogues taking place between the literary texts and the religious texts in question. Another worthy element of scholarship is the original analysis that emerges from the thorough consideration of the use of clothing within narratives. This is particularly notable in chapter two's investigation of the *Roman de Silence*, where Smith pushes the focus of transvestism beyond the usual remit of gender. While taking more modern theories on the function and purpose of cross-dressing into account, it is the inclusion of details related to contemporary attitudes towards penance, virtue, and the sin of avarice that allows Smith to turn the focus to issues of morality rather than gender.

The work is comprised of four chapters which each deal at length with a single text. It proceeds in a chronological as well as geographical order, moving from the twelfth-century *lai* of Marie de France, *Guigemar*, to the thirteenth-century Northern French tale of the kingdom of England, Heldris's *Roman de Silence*. The work then definitively crosses the channel to reach two late fourteenth-century Middle English texts, the anonymous *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*. Because of this linguistic and temporal range, each chapter has a slightly different argumentative focus, though there is a consistency maintained across the work.

In chapter one, Marie de France's *Guigemar* is considered in relation to several key contexts. The first is the utilisation of contemporary changes in fashion, in this case belts, laces, and knots, which Smith argues are employed for didactic purposes within the text. Secondly, the particular use of these novel items of dress is considered in relation to the critical responses offered by contemporary clerics, who regarded such clothing as indicative of immoral and lascivious behaviour. Another text found to be in dialogue with *Guigemar* is the Ovidian *Remedia amoris*, whose instructions on the art of love are seen to run counter to the pedagogical project Smith finds evident in Marie de France's text. What draws these various elements together cogently are the aforementioned knots, laces, and belts. While the tightened silhouette produced by these artefacts should point to unrestrained sexuality, Smith pertinently notes that Marie instead makes these items integral to controlled, faithful love. And while Ovid's text teaches the lover to move beyond constraint, Smith suggests that it is the constraint of clothing that teaches lovers in *Guigemar* to act correctly, and thus faithfully.

Chapter two's text, *Silence*, contains a similar variety of intersecting discourses, which Smith again argues is the overt intention of the author. The enforced transvestism of the girl Silence, who must hide her female identity or risk losing her inheritance, is considered in the face of religious dictates against the practice, including those of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, Tertullian, and Deuteronomy 22:5. Smith argues that cross-dressing is used in the text to explore the morality of a social structure that forces a noble girl to dress as a boy. To that end, Lateran IV's express interest in the sin of avarice, and the text's own admonishments against it, align the moral stance of *Silence* with the Council's at certain points, but then move them apart in the former's non-condemnatory position on cross-dressing. Into the mix, but with less clear objectives, is an examination of the trope of *effictio*, used in romance texts to catalogue bodily beauty as well as splendid dress, and which also functions as an indicator of beauty and nobility. Considering the trope in relation to Geoffrey of Vinsauf's discussion in his *Poetria Nova*, a work dedicated to Innocent III (convener of Lateran IV), Smith tries to widen the scope of understanding how this text deals with tropes and clothing simultaneously. This section, however, is the hardest to follow, and focus is momentarily lost in the distinction between metaphorical dress as employed in the *Poetria* and the

literary, and often literal, dress that is the subject of this chapter. A more detailed consideration of clothing as a metaphor for stylised language (noted in rhetorical treatises from Cicero through to Geoffrey of Vinsauf, and beyond) would have given some much needed clarity and context to this section, and may have helped draw a clearer line of argumentation in relation to *Silence*.^[3]

Chapter three is focused and clear throughout, and is in many ways the most successful and convincing chapter of the entire work. The infamous girdle acquired by Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and brought back from Hautdesert to Camelot, is given a fresh analytical rethink by focusing on the purpose of the girdle more widely. Furthermore, this item of clothing is used to successfully link the text to the double discourse of the “courtly and clerical” that is the larger focus of the work.^[4] Following in this vein, the chapter shows the girdle to attend to the secular and spiritual perfection of Gawain, and, interestingly, for the court of Camelot as a whole. The penitential dimension, which often posits belts as items linked to pride, is presented in a very cogent manner, thus facilitating the counter-argument of Smith, who demonstrates the virtuous powers of an in-fashion item.

While chapters one and three deal with specific and very concrete items of dress, and chapter two with a woman in man’s clothing, chapter four is something of a departure. The first “penitential manual” (p. 138) to be written by a layman, Chaucer’s *Parson’s Tale*, contained within *The Canterbury Tales*, is the subject of this chapter, and Smith argues that a similarly unexpected positioning of clothing is presented within the tale. In an inverse move from the previous works explored, this chapter argues that a penitential text takes on clothing conventions in romance texts, with the fashionably tight clothing of the fourteenth century specifically mentioned. On the one hand, aristocratic dress is condemned, but on the other, clothing of a metaphorical nature is interpreted as a way to atone for sin. This argumentation is built, like in the other chapters, upon a complex intersection of contemporary contexts, including other penitential literature that condemns aristocratic dress as well as optical theories of pleasure derived from viewing a body exposed by such clothing.

One of the most confusing aspects of this chapter, however, is the terminology employed. Smith proposes that Chaucer outlines the means by which penitents have “pleasure-in-dress” available to them. This oblique type of terminology, seen also in the phrase “sartorial satisfaction,” is found throughout the chapter, and it seems as if the author does not proceed with the lucidity and conviction that has been seen in previous chapters. One central point Smith could have clarified for the reader is the difference between metaphorical and literal clothing. While this is done at certain points, it is insufficient to carry the full argument. The reader is confronted with the possibility of aristocratic dress, which Smith at times seems to suggest is connected to atonement for sin, but this clothing quickly turns into metaphorical clothing, with no clear explanation offered. This collapsing of the material into the spiritual leads to much confusion in this chapter, and unlike the previous three, where clear arguments are followed through with compatible analyses, it feels like there is some fundamental work still to do in this chapter in order to keep it in line with its forerunners.

Throughout this work, especially chapters one to three, the binary consideration of clothing in clerical and romance contexts works well and is very productive. However, there is a tendency for the discussion to be limited when considering religious views of clothing. The interpretation of belts in chapters one and three could have benefitted, for example, from more research into religious writings on the material and spiritual benefits of wearing a girdle. The monk John Cassian, and future followers of the Benedictine rule, wrote about the essential role of the girdle in protecting themselves from deviant sexual impulses and insuring a continent, virtuous life. Given the overlap of the function of belts in these literary texts with monastic writings, more focus on a positive religious reading of clothing could have added much richness and a wider perspective to such considerations of clothing.^[5]

What must be foregrounded about this study is that Smith widens the scope of how we can understand clothing in medieval literature. Situating clothing as pertinent to both specific moments in time as well

as to the progression and meaning of narrative, Smith's analyses, especially in relation to chapters two and three, offer persuasive and original re-interpretations of texts that scholars have long-considered. The double-consideration of romance texts and clerical discourse, as applicable to each particular text, is a novel approach, and one that could be productively applied to other texts in the future.

NOTES

[1] Andrea Denny-Brown, *Fashioning Change: The Trope of Clothing in High and Late Medieval England* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012). Gale Owen-Crocker, Elizabeth Coatsworth, & Maria Hayward, eds., *Encyclopaedia of Dress and Textiles in the British Isles c. 450-1450* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[2] Sarah Grace Heller, *Fashion in Medieval France* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007). Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity During the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

[3] See Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter, eds., *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300-1475* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). In particular, see pp. 32-33, for an introductory discussion and a guide to the pertinent sources on rhetorical expression being conceived of as clothing.

[4] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, Larry D. Benson, ed., 3rd edn (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

[5] For an explanation of the origins of association between the girdle and monasticism, see Robert Deshman, *The Benedictional of St Aethelwold* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 197. This is also discussed in Guillemette Bolens and Sarah Brazil, "The Body," in Sarah-Grace Heller ed., *A Cultural History of Dress and Fashion in the Medieval Age*, vol. 2 (New York & London: Berg, forthcoming 2016).

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