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**E. Jane Burns**, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Culture*. The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002. 326 pp. Notes and bibliography. \$49.95 U.S./£35.00 G.B. (cl). ISBN 0-8122-3671-8.

Review by Jane H. M. Taylor, University of Durham, UK.

E. Jane Burns favours the oblique. In her previous book, *Bodytalk*,<sup>[1]</sup> she took as her material what had so easily been neglected, women's speech in (largely) male-authored romances and *chansons de geste*, and showed how, sympathetically analysed, women's words were a prism through which one could (re-)read the canonical texts of the Middle Ages and make them mean quite differently. The present book promises the same sleight-of-hand: it argues, says Burns, that "many of our most basic assumptions about courtly love are called into question when we consider them in relation to the varied functions of sumptuous clothes that provide social definition for key players in love scenarios" (p. 1). This is not, in other words, what in less adventurous hands it might easily have become: an anthology of clothing-descriptions, a record of "true-to-life-ness," or a compendium of key scenes and clothing terms. Rather, it is a road-map to a different reading of romance through an unregarded network of details: something like the New Historicist project, which starts, say, from an unregarded incident in which no reader, in all probability, will have seen anything other than the most hackneyed of gestures and builds out from that to a completely new social, ideological, and aesthetic slant on texts which we all thought we knew perfectly well.

This is not, of course, to suggest that "clothing" has been altogether neglected by previous scholars. On the contrary, clothing is one of those elements that is usually cited by scholars talking about the *mise en scène* of romance—the supplying of careful details for "local colour." Alternatively, it has been adduced for social purposes, as an index of the social status assigned to characters, or for lexical purposes, to discuss the precise meanings of particular cloths or items of clothing. More recently, of course, clothing has tended to attract attention when it was transgressive: scholars, and readers, have found the transvestism of a Jeanne d'Arc, or a Silence, exciting because it highlighted gender roles. Neither of these is Burns's focus. Her approach draws on anthropology, cultural history, social science, and ethnography in a vast and stimulating synthesis which will make it impossible, in future, to think of the description of clothes and robes as merely innocent. Her reading, as she says, proposes, and convincingly, that there is "a relational dynamic between courtly garments and the literary protagonists who wear them" (p. 15).

Take Burns's first chapter which is, as it were, the foundation-stone of the remainder of the book. It builds on the lush description of Fortune's gown in the *Roman de la Rose*<sup>[2]</sup> and concentrates on "Material Extravagance and the Opulence of Love." What Burns shows, in the first instance, is the way in which Fortune's dress is materially accurate and morally loaded—loaded because what is immediately obvious is Raison's distaste for display, her sense that lavish and lovely dress is merely a trap for the

unwary. Dress is a way in which Fortune seduces the innocent observer, as do all women who, typically, use clothing as a weapon or a bargaining counter (say the moralists and the preachers, or the legists who laboured to devise the complicated sumptuary laws which attempted so vainly to regulate dress). The examples Burns gives—and already, in this first chapter, one can sense a richly informed and inquiring intelligence in pursuit of the theme—sketch the three themes on which she will, very largely, focus and which she will, progressively, refine. These are the ways in which, in romances, women are portrayed as deploying clothing, as using it; the ways in which to read through dress invites us to rethink certain of our assumptions about gender and gender-roles in the Middle Ages; and finally, and more materially, the ways in which the opening up of trade made clothing emblematic of the meeting of the cultures of West and East.

Burns's first topic, then, is clothing as device. She turns first of all to the convenient but somewhat disputed "courtly love." These are images of women adorned and self-adorning, images which are dynamised by a *male gaze*, disastrously easy, claim the moralists, to attract and distort. But not always. It is Burns's argument, again, that to concentrate on clothing allows us glimpses of the *female sensibility*—in other words, that clothing can represent women's desire. She shows this, with particular acuity, in relation to the *chanson de toile* (and I do especially admire, here, the subtleties of her reading). She sees this sub-genre as empowering specifically the woman lover, or, more precisely, as abolishing the "categories of male and female" (p. 118) and introducing a new model of subjectivity.

Burns next turns to the ways in which clothing—from dresses to armour—illuminates gender roles. Here, as indeed elsewhere in this very richly documented book, she focuses not just on the well-known prose *Lancelot*, but on little-known texts such as Robert de Blois's *Floris et Lyriope*. This latter text provides an example of cross-dressing, but here Robert complicates things yet further by making the hero Floris the cross-dresser, in which guise he courts the heroine Lyriope, and by otherwise centralising the highly ambiguous figure of Narcissus. The lovers here, says Burns, "seem to thrive on, if not require, a lack of alignment between sexed bodies and the garments they wear" (p. 127). What is created (and Burns demonstrates this with her usual range of reference) is a world where gender roles should be seen not as absolute but as "spacings on a gendered sartorial continuum" (p. 146).

The final section of the book, which seems to me somewhat less successful, presents an argument based on the material history of the cloths and fabrics that flooded the newly-prosperous West in the wake of the Crusades. This time, Burns reads clothing in the light of economic circumstance: the silks and taffetas and satins that the moralists describe with such opprobrium are tainted, for them, she suggests, with "Saracen" luxury and above all hybridity. The argument is a tempting one, and Burns does show just how far the fabrics which make up dangerous luxury are indeed eastern. Her argument is that the moralists derive from the perception that luxury is eastern a parallel perception that courtly love itself is a dangerous "cultural hybrid" (p. 197). I remain, however, a little skeptical. For me, the target of clerky scorn is conspicuous consumption itself rather than its alien associations which are rarely explicit, and I wonder if we are not in danger of anachronism, of superimposing later attitudes—fifteenth- or sixteenth-century—on a less complex, materially focussed world of the earlier Middle Ages. It is, however, an index of just how successful Burns's book is that the argument itself is intensely stimulating.

I do not, however, want to quibble[3]: this is a richly interesting book, copiously documented and annotated, and with an outstandingly broad range of reference (the bibliography is delightfully eclectic and a treasure-trove for anyone interested in clothing not just in this context but in other social and anthropological spheres). It is a book which will stimulate discussion and which opens the way to new and exciting readings of the literatures of the Middle Ages.

## NOTES

[1] E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

[2] Described by Raison; see *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Félix Lecoy (Paris: Champion, 1970), ll. 6092-6101.

[3] There are, but I prefer to footnote them only, a few very minor troubles: a few unfortunate misprints (see p. 25: for oui read ou; p. 54, for pret read pert; on p. 124, for por surely read per), and a very occasional mistranslation (on p. 121, for instance, amer me doit means no more than "I must love").

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