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ROMANCE AND THE FABRIC OF FEUDAL SOCIETY:
Conjointure AND CHANGE

IN FRANCE DURING THE second half of the twelfth century, from about 1160 until 1200, a period in which culture and the arts flourished and the economy was expanding, the writers of Old French verse romance showed an unprecedented interest in clothing. Whereas the *chansons de geste* that were popular before the rise of romance gave little notice to a character's clothing, the works of authors such as Chrétien de Troyes, Marie de France, and Bérout interspersed narrative with often lengthy descriptions of costume.¹ These descriptions do not simply provide character development or realism through accumulation of detail; they also structure the plot, providing thematic coherence through repetition, reflection, or analogy.² Moreover, significant instances of clothing are not confined to description; actions involving clothing, such as dressing and undressing, giving gifts, and making clothes, have particular narrative functions as well. For the purposes of this study, I will define clothing as broadly as possible, to encompass all types of vestimentary and adornment items worn. Along with the traditional articles of clothing of the period, including *bliants*, mantles, *chaines*, and *chemises*, I discuss other

1. In *La Chanson de Roland* there is a significant amount of description of armor. The emphasis that the poet places on this one vestimentary item reflects the primacy that the society of the tenth, eleventh, and early twelfth centuries placed upon the military role of the sons of the nobility and royalty. With the shift from a wartime society to a largely peaceful one, the military role of the nobility becomes less crucial for the society, and the romances, although they continue to celebrate the knight, reflect this change both in representing knights as individuals and in according a great deal more attention to other aspects of courtly life. Correspondingly, the writers of romance expand the vestimentary repertoire to include clothing, softer and more supple than its wartime equivalent, armor.

2. All these terms refer to processes by which comparisons are invited among episodes and thematic units for the purpose of creating multiple relations among textual parts; they differ, however, in technique. Repetition is the process by which an image, motif, or action is directly and explicitly repeated; reflection and analogy are less direct; they rely on similarity without replication. Reflection occurs when an image, motif, or action is structurally similar to another, analogy when they are thematically similar.

worn items and place them under the general heading of clothing because they are all signifiers that belonged to the vestimentary code of the day. Such items include all the various pieces of armor, particularly hauberks and helmets; jewelry, with special attention to rings; and articles made of cloth, such as swaddling material and even, in one case, bedsheets, when they envelop a character and function as clothing. I have also included gifts of cloth under the heading because the raw materials for clothing are potential clothes and because their value for the vestimentary code is unmistakable.

The primary audience of the French courtly romances of the second half of the twelfth century were nobles whose contacts, whether firsthand or otherwise, with faraway, materially wealthy cultures intensified their interest in luxury items and, particularly, in luxurious clothing. It is not surprising that courtly authors, wishing to please their patrons and audiences, would include a new emphasis on clothing in the works they presented to them. In keeping with the notions that governed the art of composition, writers of romance exploited every expressive or instrumental quality of clothing they could in order to foster contemporary appeal in the stories they most often inherited from older sources. Clothing in the romance of the period became part of the weave of the text, appearing and disappearing at intervals, like a thread in a tapestry, structuring as it embellishes.

The authors of romance not only accommodated the tastes of their audience but also acclimated them to a world of change. As feudal society shifted from a period of ongoing war to one of relative peace, the mobilization of resources for war became focused on the acquisition of wealth. At the same time, the noble warrior class witnessed a shift in the justification for their elevated social status: no longer did their military prowess guarantee their place in society.³ In this new era, they had to base their status on wealth, power, their capacity for largess, and their ability to effect an impressive appearance (Duby, *Guerriers* 262). Their increased need to express their status created greater demand for luxury goods, often unavailable locally. This demand stimulated trade, which, in turn, created possibilities for the enrichment of the merchant class.⁴ The new wealth of the merchants began,

3. It is worth noting that throughout the twelfth century the nobility experienced a gradual displacement from positions of power in the government as Capetian rule was slowly consolidating and transforming into an administrative monarchy. In this new climate, the king was increasing appointing commoners to positions in the royal administration that had previously been held by members of the nobility. See Baldwin, "Capetian Court," and Luchaire, *Louis VII*.

4. Duby discusses this process at some length in *Guerriers et paysans* (269–77), claiming that the towns, in particular, favored the merchants and that among these merchants, "quelques-uns même, tout comme les principaux officiers des grands seigneurs, purent forcer l'entrée de la chevalerie" (271).

in some cases, to rival that of the nobility.⁵ The resulting material ambiguity introduced by the enrichment of the merchants through foreign trade for the luxury items the nobles needed to express their status threatened these same nobles by destabilizing their world.

The shift in material stability in the world of the twelfth-century French noble was concurrent with a shift in the imaginative and conceptual universe that is discernible in the literary expression of the day. Writers of romance created for their noble audience the illusion of a safe though fictive world in which they could imagine themselves performing great deeds and in which the merchant offered no possible threat to the stability of the system.⁶ Thus, the writers invited their audience to project itself into the roles of these heroes as they triumph in a idealized world. This world is woven together with the luxurious clothing that the nobles require to preserve and express status.⁷ Having created what appeared to be a reaffirmation of the nobles' social position and their values, these writers nonetheless inscribed the very ambiguities that so threatened their audience in the material world. At the same time that the writers provided an illusion of stasis, they were shifting the world on its axis, shifting from absolute meaning to contingent meaning as they exploited the representational powers of the sign.

I am using the term *sign* in light of the distinction that Saussure and, later, Kristeva make between the symbol and the sign.⁸ The distinction derives from a difference in relationship between the signifier and its meaning. Saussure defines this relationship as being arbitrary for the sign and motivated for the symbol. He emphasizes that "*le signe linguistique est arbitraire*" (100) inasmuch

5. Duby makes clear the link between the aristocratic need for luxury goods and their agents of exchange: "Mener cette fête permanente qui se tient au coeur du comportement aristocratique, c'est donc recourir nécessairement à des spécialistes de l'approvisionnement en denrées inconnues, merveilleuses et lointaines—à des marchands (*Guerriers* 262).

6. The merchants were often denigrated in the courtly romance of the period, as in *Guillaume d'Angleterre* when the narrator comments extensively and throughout the romance upon the base nature of the merchants who foster the king's two sons. However, merchants found a more sympathetic representation in the fabliau, where writers "describe the merchant's profits, but they also point out his qualities: ability, energy, courage, and a fondness for dangerous ventures. . . . [They] deserved much consideration, since their services were important for the church, for the knightly caste, and for all of society" (*Gurevich* 263).

7. Duby notes the society's reliance upon clothing in order to distinguish among classes and to determine social rank and role: "À l'époque, les catégories sociales sont clairement désignées par le vêtement, la forme des souliers, la coupe des cheveux—car il convenait que l'on reconnaisse au premier coup d'oeil à l'habit le moine, le pénitent, le prince, le rustre, la femme honnête et celle qui ne l'est pas" (*Trois Ordres* 74–75).

8. Saussure makes this distinction in his *Cours de linguistique générale* (101), and Kristeva throughout her essay "Du symbole au signe." I discuss this distinction in more detail later in this chapter.

as “[le signifiant] est *immotivé*, c’est-à-dire arbitraire par rapport au signifié, avec lequel il n’a aucune attache naturelle” (101; emphasis in original). The symbol, on the other hand, is a less flexible signifier because its meaning is motivated, that is, *not* arbitrary and, moreover, dependent upon some sort of resemblance or other intrinsic connection to that meaning. The sign’s arbitrary connection between the signifier and the signified naturally allows for greater flexibility with regard to the assignment of meaning. In other words, the sign, because of the arbitrary connection between its form and meaning, can simply mean *more*, by having differing meanings and by undergoing a different process of signification from that of the symbol. Therefore, the sign’s representational potential is greater than that of the symbol.

Confronted with their changing world, the members of the nobility would not surprisingly wish to cling to a disappearing, glorious past, and the writers who wrote for them understood this attitude. Like their patrons and audience, the writers of romance, most of whom belonged to the educated elite, although not necessarily to the nobility, also looked to the past, albeit a different past.⁹ In the scholastic tradition of the day, the antique and classical authors provided both instruction and source material for literary creation. The artistic merit of a literary work was measured by how well it could mediate between past masterworks and the concerns of the present. Writers rewrote and modified existing works, using their antiquity as a source of authority while using their own skill to incorporate contemporary elements into the work. This mode of literary production was ideally suited to its audience because, like its audience, it derived its authority from the past while striving to make itself appealing to contemporary ideals. Moreover, twelfth-century French courtly literature and its noble audience both placed a great emphasis on clothing.¹⁰

9. Roberta Krueger points out that these writers were most often clerics who found themselves ideologically at odds with the subject matter presented to them by their patrons, and she further asserts that “Chrétien embellishes and partly obscures the stark realities of men’s power over women and dresses them up so that they may appear benign and even beneficial; this is the process I refer to as ‘mystification.’ But he does not attempt to hoodwink his readers into blind acceptance of the ideals of chivalry and courtly love. He lays bare the process by which women are appropriated in such a way that the reader may criticize romance mystification” (*Women Readers* 34).

10. Dyan Elliott claims that during this period, “dress became something of a Western obsession” (286). Very little direct evidence of this enhanced awareness has survived from the twelfth century: we have no manuals of dress, if indeed such existed in that period, nor do we have many sources that document attitudes about dress. However, we do know from sermons of the church fathers that clothing styles had undergone several important changes during the twelfth century, including lacing the sides of garments to accentuate the wearer’s figure and the lengthening of sleeves and trains (for more detail, see my discussion of costume history in Chapter 2). Moreover,

Conjointure

Douglas Kelly points out that twelfth-century writers would “imitate, but also recreate the received *materia* to fit new emphases, new intentions, and new audiences” (*Conspiracy* 111–12). The very form of romance was new in the twelfth century and therefore invited, created, and even required new meanings. Additionally, societal concerns in the period differed from those of previous periods, both in that society had shifted from a wartime period to one of relative peace and in that it was witnessing dramatic changes in the social structures that formed it. The *chanson de geste* had been remarkably effective as a literary expression of the national pride necessary in wartime, but it proved to be less valued in the courtly circles to which the knights had retired after their military service was no longer needed. Romance, on the other hand, emphasized the new values of the society: chivalry, *courtoisie*, courtly love, and the material luxury that distinguished the court.¹¹ However, the audience of romance did not reject the knightly exploits that made up the action of the *chanson de geste*; rather, they desired to see their military glory cast into a new courtly context, just as they themselves had been. The project of writing romance, then, became a project of rewriting: writers chose material from antecedent sources to rewrite into different contexts, and the court and its concerns are at both the origin and the center of romance.

Chrétien de Troyes, in line 14 of his prologue to *Erec et Enide*, claims that, unlike his predecessors who mangle and corrupt their sources, he is about to draw from an adventure tale *une molt bele conjointure*. He is evoking here the medieval notion of *conjointure*, in which the author of romance would use various source material and his or her skills as a writer to weave together a cohesive and beautiful text from divergent material, forming a new, original version. Eugène Vinaver defines the term, after a short review of its etymology, as “ce qui réunit, rassemble ou organise des éléments divers et même dissemblables, . . . ce qui les transforme en un tout organisé” (*Recherche* 107). Marie de France, in her prologue to the *Lais*,

we have substantial evidence that cloth figured as the most extensively traded commodity throughout the twelfth century, with a premium placed on the fine woolens from Flanders and the silks imported from the Levant. This fact, although it does not directly indicate a heightened awareness of clothing among the nobility, certainly suggests that there was a great deal of attention paid to and much expenditure made for the acquisition of the materials to produce luxury clothing.

11. Eugène Vinaver contends that romance differs from the *chanson de geste* in that “love interest and the pursuit of adventures unrelated to any common aim . . . displaced the theme of the defense of Christendom and the preoccupation of feudal warfare” (*Rise* 1).

provides more information than does Chrétien concerning the provenance of the method. She explains that the ancients, among whose heirs she counts herself, intentionally left aspects of their works obscure so that “pur ceus qui a venir esteient / E ki aprendre le deveient, / K'i peüssent gloser la lettre / E de lur sen le surplus mettre” (for those who would come along later and learn them could gloss the text and add more significance from their insight) (vss. 13–16).¹² Chrétien and his contemporaries would have seen their literary projects as the skillful use of classical techniques and devices (which conformed to their scholastic tradition) to translate or transform *materia* from various sources into compelling and beautiful new works that their audiences would find pleasing and in which everything has meaning and purpose. Their works, then, would need to reflect an amplified social reality to which their noble patrons could relate and would require inclusion of those textual features that were of the greatest interest to the society of the period. Kelly has pointed out that “authors like Chrétien when retelling and rewriting received *matières*, along with those who imitated his stories, themes, motifs, and lines of verse, did so in a cultural context that favored rhetorical training” (*Conspiracy* xi). Chrétien himself refers to his debt to Macrobius in *Erec et Enide*, explaining, “Macrobes m’ansaigne a descrire” (Macrobius teaches me to describe) (vs. 6741). The choice of places in the text, or *topoi*, to amplify and embellish depended first and foremost on the tastes and ideals of the audience, particularly in a system of artistic patronage. One such area of interest, as we shall see, was clothing, and a signifying system based on clothing would have appealed to the noble audience of Chrétien and his contemporaries, since the social ideas about clothing were beginning to change with certain other changes in society.¹³

The authors of the period were in a very real sense *weaving* a narrative. They transformed older material by infusing it with the ideals and nostalgia of the present, all through the use of age-old methods of composition. Their production bridged the gap between past and present. The means by

12. Krueger, writing about gender differences and how they are portrayed in the literature, says of Marie: “Partly because Marie’s fictions imagine unusual answers to ordinary, yet intractable problems, they highlight the constraints and tensions faced by men and women in ‘real’ life, where no ideal solutions can be found. By assembling twelve diverse stories [in her *Lais*] that fail to converge around a simple moral truth, Marie invites her audience to add their own ‘surplus de . . . sens’” (“Questions” 139).

13. Michel Pastoureau and Dominique Simonnet assert about the twelfth century that “à cette époque, on est pris d’une vraie soif de classification, on veut hiérarchiser les individus, leur donner des signes d’identité, des codes de reconnaissance” (*Petit livre* 19).

which the transformation occurred was through topical invention, which Kelly defines in the following way: “The author identifies (invention) those places (*topoi*) which he or she can elaborate upon (amplification) in order to represent persons, things, and actions as he or she intends for them to appear” (*Conspiracy* 38). Invention is a threefold operation, which includes drawing on source material (*ab auctore*), using material from the writer’s mind (*de suo*), and skillfully employing the art (*ex arte*) (66). “Topical invention encompasses authorial interpretation of *matière*, disposition of parts, amplification, and choice of ornamental devices and vocabulary” (“Rhetoric” 247), and includes such features as versification, embellishment, and description (*Romances* 192). The term *description* (*descriptio*) in the context of medieval rhetoric has a broad range of meanings. “*Descriptio* overlaps in meaning with rewriting as copying, paraphrasing, imitating, and emulating; that is, with any original description by which an antecedent matter, motif, or theme is rewritten in order to enhance, improve upon, or correct the prior version or versions” (*Conspiracy* 42).

The medieval art of rewriting provided the writers of the late twelfth century with a poetic enterprise perfectly suited to appeal to their audience. Through their use of *conjointure*, writers were able to give their noble audience the best of both worlds. They could commit to parchment the idealized fantastic world of knights and great deeds, fulfilling the nobles’ need to remember or invent their glorious ancestral past, conjoined with the new world of fantastic material goods needed by the nobles to reassert their status in the void left in the wake of wartime. The distinction between the *chanson de geste* and the romance will again serve as an illustration of this point: whereas the *chanson de geste* relates the knightly exploits of the warrior class in the context of one country’s war against another, the romance relates not only individual knightly exploits but also knightly behavior at court. The romance adds the component of the court as the ultimate context for all action and incorporates female characters as well.¹⁴ Thus, the romance sets knightly exploits firmly within a courtly context in which both deeds and the accouterments of proper courtly behavior allow

14. Although romance is often perceived as empowering women by casting them in larger roles within the works, Simon Gaunt and Krueger have both argued that, in the framework of a feminist reading, the shift from epic to romance in fact marginalized them more, primarily reducing them to objects of exchange between men. Both have also remarked that the patronage of Marie de Champagne for Chrétien’s *Lancelot*, a feature of the romance that seems to confer to the female power over the male cleric, it is, in the end, a pact between two male clerics that allows for completion of the work (Gaunt, *Gender* 92–103; Krueger, *Women Readers* 35–39).

characters to distinguish themselves, courtly behavior including chivalry, *courtoisie*, and all the material trappings of the court, especially fine food, fine horses, fine linens and tapestries, fine armor, and fine clothing. Yet in the very act of creating this dual world, writers shifted the representational axis that formed the basis for their work. They began to use composition and description in a new way and for a different result, namely, the creation of a representational universe in which signification occurs with greater dynamism. In this new system, signifiers had meaning relative to their contexts and resisted the confines of the preexisting vestimentary code.

Kelly contends that Chrétien de Troyes was an author who had mastered the techniques of composition and description to such an extent that he was capable of using them to create a new expression (*Romances* 197–207). Kelly has documented, in his chapter on description in *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes*, a movement in Chrétien’s work from formal, static description, defined as an iteration of “conventional stereotypes like perfect human beauty or consummate ugliness, stages in combat, . . . the ceremony of hospitality, etc.” (191), to “glimpses” of a more abstract type, such as Chrétien’s description of Enide as beautiful despite the ragged state of her clothes (198) or the simultaneous self-destruction of Laudine’s beauty and its reconstruction by Yvain (200). Kelly’s assertions attest not only to Chrétien’s mastery of the literary aesthetic specific to romance but also to a more general trend in representation. Delineating the particular way that romance writers used a seemingly restrictive process of artistic creation actually to generate new forms, he shows how these writers inscribed ambivalence into their works through description. However, although Kelly sometimes draws upon clothing descriptions to illustrate his points, he is not specifically concerned with the writers’ use of clothing as a signifying system or their deviations from a vestimentary code. My goal, by contrast, is to elucidate a similar, even parallel, process to the one Kelly describes, but I am focusing on and attempting to account for the ways in which writers both used the existing, highly restrictive vestimentary code and exploited its limitations to create new meanings for existing forms. Following Kelly’s documentation of this movement from an overly determined system toward a freer, more creative expression, I am documenting a shift in a particular aspect of the entire representational system of the period and am examining the use of clothing as a signifier to do so. This transition occurs in the very process of signification by which meaning is assigned to a certain form.

Symbols, Signs, and the Rise of Fashion

To demonstrate the shift in the process of signification, I have found it useful to borrow from the field of linguistics two opposing terms: *symbol* and *sign*. These two terms convey two different types of relationships between a signifier and its meaning. I am following both Saussure and Kristeva when I define these relationships in the following way: the symbol has a relationship to its meaning that is fixed and motivated, or more specifically, based on a resemblance of some sort, whereas the sign has an entirely arbitrary and contingent relationship to its meaning. My assertion is that a shift in mentality occurred in the twelfth century. Until this period, a mentality prevailed for which the symbol was the dominant model for the attribution of meaning in the world, but during the course of the century this mentality was at least challenged, if not replaced, by one whose model was the arbitrary nature of the sign and its contingent relationship to meaning. This transition in mentality is, in my view, a result of and a response to changing conditions in the material world, such as the encroachment of the merchant class upon the wealth of the nobility. These changes made necessary a shift in the attribution of meaning precisely because they themselves introduced arbitrariness and ambiguity into the social system of the day. I do not, however, mean to suggest that the sign as a linguistic phenomenon replaced the symbol in any absolute sense: I merely wish to use the distinction to illustrate a shift in mentality that became manifest in the artistic expression of the period. Moreover, as I will argue below, symbol and sign coexist as part of the clothing signifying system that derives from the vestimentary code of the twelfth century. A more detailed discussion of the properties of both the symbol and the sign will assist in making my point.

In her essay "Du symbole au signe," Julia Kristeva claims that the symbol predominated as the basis of medieval thought until the thirteenth century: "C'est une pratique sémiotique cosmogonique: ces éléments (les symboles) renvoient à une (des) transcendance(s) universelle(s), irréprésentable(s) et méconnaissable(s)" (26). Although I completely agree that the sign replaced the symbol as the dominant mode of thought during the Middle Ages, I would assert that this transition began not in the thirteenth century but in the twelfth. The evidence that I document throughout this study in the verse romances of the twelfth century forms the basis of my argument. However, despite our differing assignment of dates to the phenomenon, we are in

agreement with regard to the mechanism by which it occurred. Kristeva is remarking upon more than a linguistic property: her contention concerns the very axis upon which meaning travels. Her assertion echoes that of Johan Huizinga when he tells us that “the Middle Ages never forgot that all things would be absurd if their meaning were exhausted in their function and their place in the phenomenal world, if by their essence they did not reach into a world beyond this” (201). Symbols are therefore signifiers that are motivated; that is, there is some inherent (or perceived inherent) relationship between the signifier and the signified. Saussure defines the symbol by its lack of total arbitrariness: “Il n’est pas vide; il y a un rudiment de lien naturel entre le signifiant et le signifié” (101).¹⁵ To illustrate the motivated nature of the symbol, Arthur Asa Berger asserts that the symbol of a pair of scales to signify “justice” cannot be replaced by just any other symbol, such as a chariot (18). Kristeva calls symbols restrictive in nature because their meanings exist prior to their actual articulation (27). For example, in twelfth-century France, armor designated “knighthood,” and had done so since before any single given piece of armor was worn or even made.

During the course of the Middle Ages, Kristeva maintains, the relationship between the signifying unit and the idea weakened, and the signifying unit “prend de plus en plus de ‘matérialité’ et va jusqu’à oublier son ‘origine’” (28). This transformation, according to Kristeva,

révèle une loi: l’unité signifiante n’est plus renvoyée à l’idée qui se proliférait à travers elle dans son immensité; l’unité signifiante, par contre, devient opaque, s’identifie à elle-même, se ‘matérialise,’ et sa dimension verticale commence à perdre de l’intensité, et c’est sa possibilité d’articulation avec d’autres unités signifiantes qui s’accroît. . . . Cette possibilité de l’unité signifiante de s’articuler soit avec soi-même (donc de se répéter) soit avec d’autres, souvent opposées, substitue à une structure monovalente (la structure symbolique), une structure hétérovalente, déchirée, double. (29)

Moreover, in this system, as Saussure points out, the sign has meaning only in relation to other signs (117). Kristeva goes on to maintain that the sign essentially has three properties:

15. Charles Sanders Peirce attests, moreover, to the fact that symbols are based on habit, rather than upon innovation, and thus “do not enable us to add to our understanding even so much as a necessary consequent, unless by means of definite preformed habit” (251).

- Il ne réfère pas à une réalité unique et singulière, mais ÉVOQUE un ensemble d'images et d'idées associées. Il tend à se détacher du fond transcendantal qui le supporte (on peut dire qu'il est 'arbitraire') tout en restant expressif.
- Il est COMBINATOIRE et en cela CORRÉLATIF: son sens résulte de la combinatoire à laquelle il participe avec les autres signes.
- Il recèle un principe de TRANSFORMATION (dans son champ les structures s'engendrent et se transforment à l'infini). (35)

The distinction between the motivated symbol and the arbitrary sign may also be applied to clothing under the rubrics of *prefashion* and *fashion*. Clothing up until the late twelfth century would fall under the category of *prefashion*.¹⁶ During this period, a person's dress was highly determined by his or her socioeconomic situation, and the available "looks" or styles were determined by economic, technological, and even political factors. The quality of a person's dress, then, was in direct correlation to that person's status, geographic location, and political situation. In this way, clothing before the late twelfth century was functionally a symbol because it had a motivated relationship with its meaning, the wearer's identity; it was monovalent, since any given article of clothing could refer only to a unique wearer's identity or status.

Most costume historians place the rise of fashion at some point in either the thirteenth or fourteenth century.¹⁷ Anne Hollander defines fashion as "constant, perceptible fluctuations of visual design, created out of the combined forms of tailored dress and body" (90), and she claims that in the twelfth century, "fashion was not truly moving" (363). Malcolm Barnard claims that fashion explicitly requires "the possibility of moving between classes in order to exist" (59), which would place the advent of fashion well after the economic rise of the bourgeoisie.¹⁸ Fred Davis describes fashion as highly context-dependent: "What some combination of clothes of a certain style emphasis 'means' will vary tremendously depending upon the identity

16. Sarah-Grace Heller discusses the impact that the Crusades in the late eleventh century had on the rise of fashion, arguing successfully that although this contact with the East surely inspired in the European noble imagination the desire to possess Eastern textiles and fashions, it does not appear that such fashions actually existed in Europe until the late twelfth or early thirteenth century; see her article "Fashion in French Crusade Literature."

17. Elizabeth Ewing is the exception to this rule, placing the advent of fashion in the middle of the twelfth century (18).

18. Hollander agrees that the rise of fashion coincides with "the rise of towns and the middle class, along with the consolidation of monarchical power" (362).

of the wearer, the occasion, the place, the company, and even something as vague and transient as the wearer's and the viewer's moods" (8).

This shifting of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, as Davis puts it, "recognizes the possibility of alternative, contradictory or obscure interpretations" (22). The clothing code in a fashion system corresponds to the attributes of the sign outlined above by Kristeva. Fashion provides heterovalent clothing, evoking a collection of ideas while remaining distant from any absolute reading; this clothing has a correlative meaning based on its interaction with other signs; and new styles are constantly articulated and transformed.¹⁹ In fact, pushed to its extreme, fashion provides, as Baudrillard notes, signifiers empty of external meaning: the signifiers signify themselves.²⁰ The fashion to which Baudrillard refers is a distinctly modern one, at great odds with the burgeoning ambiguities introduced into the vestimentary code of the twelfth century: the shift toward a fashion system began in the twelfth century but did not manifest wholly for centuries to come.²¹

Sarah-Grace Heller, in her *Fashion in Medieval France*, convincingly argues for the existence of a fashion system operating in France in the thirteenth century. She bases this assertion upon ten criteria that she identifies as crucial to such a system, including factors such as the desire for newness; constant, systematic change; and individual expression within a framework of social imitation, as well as an emphasis on consumption, superficial changes, and a democratizing aspect (8–9). She asks: "The thirteenth-century ideal hero is repeatedly represented as an individual who strove for distinction in appearance. Is that not fashion?" (4). I would say so. Fashion, as she defines it, constitutes a criticism of the past and its tastes in favor of what is new, and while it is true that twelfth-century nobles certainly desired new, aesthetically pleasing

19. Davis points out that the couturiere Coco Chanel advised "her wealthy clients to dress 'as plainly as their maids' and to wear cheap costume jewelry" but to wear "real jewelry 'as if it were junk'" (63). This advice constitutes a "fashion statement" that is possible only in a system of signs for which the signifier-signified relationship has become unstable.

20. Baudrillard discusses fashion in general, that is, all types of fashion rather than uniquely vestimentary fashion, in *L'Echange symbolique* (129–52). He situates his discussion firmly within the context of modernity, claiming that only in the framework of the opposition between the "traditional" and the "modern" can fashion exist (135).

21. In Baudrillard's terms, twelfth-century France would be seen as part of "l'ordre primitif" because in such societies "l'ostentation des signes n'a jamais cet effet 'esthétique'" (*L'Echange* 136). Here, he is alluding to the modern experience of fashion as an aesthetic experience, whereas the ostentation of clothing in twelfth-century French society serves a social or ritual function. Exotic or expensive clothing affirms status, establishes identity, and provides the owner a means to reaffirm social ties through gifts. So, although there are surely aesthetic considerations to be made with regard to the desirability of garments, aristocratic clothing performs less of an aesthetic function than a ritual one.

clothes, they did so in the hopes of maintaining class distinction. So, while two of Heller's criteria are met (newness and pleasure), the remaining eight are not, at least not fully, during the twelfth century, as evidenced in literary texts.²²

Fashion is therefore a system in which the symbolic nature of clothing that prevailed until the late twelfth century becomes destabilized and admits new possibilities of interpretation for individual clothing signifiers. Although the cases are certainly rare, the increasing wealth of the merchant class would allow some merchants to dress in clothing that had previously been worn only by the nobility, thereby destabilizing the symbolic meaning of "noble" for these articles of clothing. This opening up of the clothing system coincided with the changing material conditions in France during this period and could be taken as evidence for placing the very beginnings of the advent of fashion in the late twelfth century.²³ Although the main distinction between the clothing of the different classes was based primarily upon the varying quality of materials used to produce it, the twelfth century witnessed a practical, though not technical, innovation: people, particularly nobles, began to lace the sides of their garments to give the illusion of fitting (Ewing 18, Netherton 7). This modification of silhouette provides a glimpse of the fashion system that would fully articulate itself in later centuries. Thus, the destabilization of the clothing symbol at the more abstract level perfectly reflected this material announcement of the clothing sign that typifies fashion and its inherent arbitrariness.

Vestimentary Significance: The Meaning of Clothing

Without question, clothes have meaning, and this meaning is social in nature.²⁴ Barnard makes the claim, borrowed from Thomas Carlyle, that part of clothing's role or function is "to make society possible, to be part of

22. Heller elaborates on her ten criteria throughout *Fashion in Medieval France*, as well as exploring thoroughly the various theories about the date of the birth of fashion. Her book brings new light into the discussion and provides, I am convinced, at least a firm answer to when we can for certain discern the existence of a fashion system. My argument is that in the twelfth century, things were far murkier, less obvious; French society was on the verge, exhibiting some characteristics of the fashion system but not others. I also fully agree with Heller that it is through literary works of that period that we can most clearly make out the contours of change.

23. This conclusion is indeed the one that Ewing reaches when she places the rise of fashion in the middle of the twelfth century (18).

24. Burns, in her volume *Courtly Love Undressed*, attests to this social function even within the context of a literary universe, referring to the literary dressed body as the "sartorial body," one that arises from an understanding of clothing as "an active force in generating social bodies" (12).

the production and reproduction of relative power within a society” (48). A society’s material culture is part of the mechanism by which behavior patterns are acquired and transmitted because intellectual and cultural features become embodied in artifacts, for our purposes, clothing, by imbuing these objects with symbolic meaning (Berger 9). Different modes of dressing within a society have such embedded meanings and, as Barnard points out, serve “to communicate membership of a cultural group both to those who are members of it and to those who are not” (56).

Social structures such as family, economy, polity, religion, and class make up the larger pattern of social organization that constitutes the social order, and associations of individuals with these structures are often made visible through that person’s clothing (Roach and Eicher 2). As Roach and Eicher note: “As human beings within a society develop social selves, dress and adornment are intimately linked to their interacting with one another. These personal accouterments assist the individual in presenting his image and expressing himself. He can manipulate his appearance to fit his interpretation of a specific situation, adjusting to the variety of situations in which he finds himself” (2). During the process of socialization, an individual learns to read the various symbols of his or her society. Material objects, especially clothing and adornment items, carry messages and serve as the symbols of a given social setting, becoming the tangible means for exerting some degree of control over the social situation (187). The process of socialization is first and foremost the acquisition of a set of social norms, as well as the capacity for understanding and reproducing them. Behavior that varies considerably from society’s norms is considered a deviance (188). A certain degree of deviation from the norm is tolerated by a society, but “there are limits beyond which idiosyncrasy will not be endured” (189).

Roach and Eicher outline ways in which clothing performs within societies, helping to define visually social roles, by differentiating the powerful from the weak, the provider from the receiver, the lord from the serf, and the leader from the follower (10). The apparent opposition inherent in this clothing function tends to derive from a garment’s rarity. “Acquiring the most expensive clothing is often a way of achieving differentiating through rarity, which usually commands social admiration” (9). Conversely, a person’s clothing may be deceptive (10), as when the increasing wealth of the merchant class over the course of the Middle Ages created opportunities for its members to attire themselves as nobles. Related to this first function are two other functions that clothing performs in a society: as a statement of social worth and as an indicator of economic status (12–13). Statements

about social worth entail the use of symbols, a scarlet mantle lined with ermine, for example, and have obvious connections to economic status. “The elite maintain a monopoly on these symbols as long as they maintain a monopoly on wealth, for lack of economic resources prohibits lower classes from adopting adornment that could proclaim for them a social worth equal to that of the upper class” (12). Again, the implications for the nobility of twelfth-century France are clear: the merchants’ encroachment upon the nobles’ economic well-being and the latter’s need to cling to an idealistic social role created the potential for play, or slippage, in the highly codified vestimentary system nobles embraced. Finally, Roach and Eicher write about two other functions of clothing that, unlike the habitual functions described above, are less frequent and more transitory in nature, noting the importance of clothing in certain social rituals (14). Coronations, weddings, funerals, investitures, and dubbing ceremonies fall into this category of function. They also affirm that all these categories are susceptible to subversion; a person’s clothing choice is just as capable of disguising his or her identity or state of being as it is of reinforcing it (8).

Clothing has many functions in a society, but there are two main categories: expressive and instrumental (Roach and Eicher 6). Clothing is a visual signifier that divulges information about the person wearing the clothing—his or her beliefs, sentiments, status, rank, or place within the power structure. This would correspond to the expressive function of clothing. However, clothing may be used to fulfill certain goals as well. This is the case with ceremonial or occupational dress, both of which would be considered the instrumental function of clothing. Furthermore, these two functions may be simultaneous (6). We could also borrow a distinction from medieval rhetoric in which expressive dress would demonstrate a character’s *ethos*, or the customary and habitual moods or states of mind. Instrumental dress, by contrast, being geared toward action, would allow expression of *pathos*, characterized by strong movements of emotions, thus transitory in nature. In this last case, it is clear that clothes “are associated with a complex of strong emotions and serve to channel strong emotions” (Cordwell and Schwartz 28).

Literary, or written, clothing deserves some special consideration. Roland Barthes, in his semiotic study of clothing, *Système de la mode*, talks of written clothing in terms of a translation of the real garment in which the author chooses the features of the garment he or she will represent. Literature uses the technique of description to transform a hidden object, whether real or imaginary, into language: thus, description makes this object

exist (23). Unlike a visual representation of the garment or the experience of a real garment, the verbal representation limits the possibilities of perceiving the object (23–24). The language used to describe the clothing object singles out features or elements of the article of clothing for emphasis (25–26), and the audience’s perceptions of any given literary clothing object are thus determined by the choices that the author has made in his or her description of the object. In literature, the article of clothing exists only through its representation: it is “porté par le langage, mais aussi il lui résiste, et c’est dans ce jeu qu’il se fait” (14). In this way, written clothing “est tout entier constitué en vue d’une signification” (18). Clearly, written clothing has the potential to mediate the material reality of the world and the imagined universe of the ideal. Equally clear is that the writers of twelfth-century French courtly literature are engaged in such a project.