Weaving Narrative

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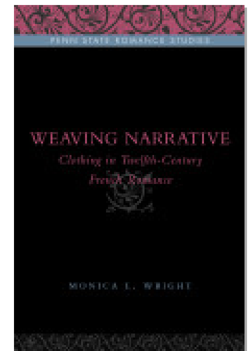

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MATERIAL MATTERS: CLOTHING IN CHANGING CONTEXTS

THE TWELFTH CENTURY, WITH its great societal shifts, new literary expressions, and technical innovations and improvements, accordingly saw a heightened emphasis on personal adornment, particularly given the influx of luxurious fabrics from the East and the introduction of different modes of dress borrowed from Muslim societies. Nonetheless, change did not occur overnight, and the advent of fashion was, as Heller has shown, tempered by a nostalgia among the nobility to retain its position at the top of the social hierarchy.

Costume History

For the most part, twelfth-century French clothing possessed a stability of form inasmuch as each individual garment remained remarkably constant in terms of both cut and shape even across many variables, such as class. However, certain modifications, particularly those of a decorative nature, were beginning to appear. In medieval France, the layering of clothing was the norm. Men and women both wore several types of garments, some of which could be added or removed depending on climactic conditions, the formality of the occasion, or the class of the wearer.[1] Clothing vocabulary is notoriously difficult to translate, for two reasons. First, the terms no longer correspond to any modern clothing items, and the modern reader of medieval romance can be easily baffled by the terms, leading to a misreading of the text. Second, there is little possibility of costume historians identifying with perfect certainly what clothing terms in medieval texts, especially of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, match up to what little visual evidence

1. Yvonne Deslandres asserts: "Il peut paraître étrange que nous ne puissions percevoir aucune différence entre les vêtements d'été et d'hiver; mais l'habitude étant toujours de superposer les robes les unes par-dessus des autres, on peut supposer que l'on supprimait une ou deux suivant la température" (101).

remains of clothing of the period.[2] The entire ensemble, or outfit, was referred to as a *robe*, unlike the modern French usage of the word (Goddard 198). The basic components of typical aristocratic male and female dress in the twelfth century were the same. The undergarment, or *chemise*, usually made of linen, was a loose tuniclike garment with long sleeves worn under all other garments.[3] The long *chainse*, most likely of wool or linen for everyday wear, tended to have fitted sleeves and often served as an outer garment on an informal occasion or as an intermediate layer under the *bliaut*, the outer gown, which was most often made of wool or silk and worn belted (Evans 5). One also wore a cloak (*chape* or *chasuble*) over the *bliaut* if weather necessitated it. The vast majority of outer clothing articles were woolen, despite the numerous passages in verse romance describing garments of the finest silk, and this discrepancy once again highlights to what extent the writers of romance were creating an idealized world for their audience. Men additionally wore *braies*, or britches.[4] In colder weather, men, and likely women, wore *chausses*, hose of tailored cloth worn over the feet and legs and under the shoes (Boucher 172). The garments of the period, according to Hollander, "show a fairly static simplicity of shape," differences obtaining mostly for utilitarian reasons (363). She further explains: "Sumptuous fabrics were worn by the rich, mean ones by the poor; but the

2. Further complicating the matter is that most visual evidence that dates from the twelfth century does not correspond to the vernacular tales recounted in the romances of the period. The vast majority of manuscript illumination of the second half of the century depicts biblical and liturgical figures rather than the laity. We must wait until manuscripts of the thirteenth century to witness images of the characters of twelfth-century romance, and very often this has meant that Chrétien's knights and ladies are presented in costume of the thirteenth century. There are, in fact, even more representations of the same narrative material that date from the fourteenth century, when fashion had taken a radical turn away from the more simple shapes of the late twelfth century. These late manuscript illuminations are beautiful and contribute visual aids to imagine the exploits of the characters of the romances, but they do very little to illuminate the actual vestimentary realities of the period in which Chrétien and Marie composed their tales.

3. Romaine Wolf-Bonvin reminds us that in Chrétien's *Perceval*, the hero, in his Welsh costume, wears a *chemise* of hemp (*chanvre*), whereas in Chrétien's *Cliges*, Alexandre arrives in Arthur's court wearing a *chemise* of silk (*soie*) ("Un vêtement" 392n2). These are, however, depictions of unusual characters, for Perceval is noble, and he should rightly be wearing a finer fabric as an undergarment, but here Chrétien is underlining the hero's rustic lifestyle; Alexandre, who is the son of the Eastern Emperor, is wearing a silk *chemise* to demonstrate his wealth and status, but also very likely because of his easy access to the silk production in Byzantium.

The universality of the *chemise* is noted by Hollander, who calls it "a voluminous white garment of extreme simplicity with little or no shaping and trimming" (159). She also remarks upon its symbolic importance, standing for "the humility of nakedness at a time when real nakedness was usually very well covered" (159).

4. For a discussion of *braies* as depicted in the romances of the twelfth and thirteenth century, see Burns, "Ladies Don't Wear *Braies*."

cut and fit of clothes was uniformly simple and unsophisticated for all classes and both sexes.[5] Wealth and rank were expressed in the nobility's clothing but no kind of aesthetic or stylistic superiority" (363). Piponnier and Mane echo her assertion but add that dramatic changes in types of fabrics and their decoration, influenced by access to the cloth goods of the Islamic world, were steadily transforming the appearance of aristocratic clothing (59).[6]

Although, in previous periods, men had sometimes worn short tunics, around the year 1140, most everyone, and not only royalty, began to wear long gowns (Pinasa 69).[7] The nobility further accentuated this lowering of the hemline by exaggerating certain features of their costume, such as long trains on cloaks and wide, draping sleeves on *bliauts* (Boucher 171, Evans 5, Pinasa 73). The sleeves of ladies' *bliauts* were sometimes so long that the hanging ends were knotted (Evans 7). The church generally disapproved of what it saw as an excessive consumption of goods, and many church fathers wrote to condemn the fashion; for example, Maurice de Sully writes: "Neis a femes deffent il qu'elles ne se fachent trop beles por leurs maris par leurs vesteures, car trop i a de luxure. Par ces paroles se devroient castier cil et celes qui ont leur orgeuleuses vesteures mi paries et entaillies et lor lons trains" (It is prohibited for women to make themselves too beautiful for their husbands with their clothing, for there is too much debauchery. With these words, they should be ashamed, those who wear prideful, fitted clothes cut from two colors of cloth with long trains).[8] Adding to the luxurious nature

5. I think Hollander's value judgment here is a bit too harsh, since she equates simplicity of cut with a lack of sophistication in design. We have no evidence that the garments of the period were perceived by those wearing them as "unsophisticated."

6. Burns has examined the prevalence of Islamic fabrics in the elaboration of a Western courtly identity among the nobility during this period. Her assertion is that, although twelfth-century Europeans experienced enmity with the Muslim East, they nonetheless constructed exquisite garments from their textiles, thereby introducing an Eastern element into what was the Western ideal of beauty. See in particular her chapter "Saracen Silk: Dolls, Idols, and Courtly Ladies," in her *Courtly Love Undressed*.

7. Enlart agrees with Pinasa's date, whereas Laver places the lengthening a decade earlier. "Une révolution se produisait, en effet, vers 1140, et la mode des vêtements longs pour les deux sexes semble être venue alors d'Orient, par l'intermédiaire des Normands de Sicile" (Enlart 31). "The tunic of the nobility, from about 1130 onwards, began to be made with a tight-fitting body and the long skirt to be slit up from the front to thigh-level and kept in place with a sword-belt" (Laver, *Costume* 31). François Boucher points out that the "short *bliaut*" of the early twelfth century was probably the descendant garment of the *gonelle* of the Carolingian period (171).

8. Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, ms. fr., 2111, f. 35, as quoted in Bourgain (303). The Norman monk Ordericus Vitalis echoes his concern in condemning the "French" fashion among the young nobility (Bumke 138). Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, in a letter to the virgin Sophia, laments that women of the court adorn themselves so richly and so extravagantly while their souls are in peril; he claims emphatically that the superficial beauty of one's garments constitutes no replacement for the

of their clothing, the nobility often decorated the hems or edges of the sleeves with precious bands of embroidered cloth.[9] Essentially concurrent with these clothing trends was the tendency among ladies to lace the sides of their gown to accentuate their female shape. Elizabeth Ewing explains that around 1150, women's dresses became tight fitting and appeared waisted, although "there was as yet no cutting to form the waist and no separation of bodice and skirt, but the lacing created the first closely defined waistline in modern dress history. Buttons and other fasteners did not yet exist, so lacing was the obvious way to achieve this effect" (18). Robin Netherton asserts that in the absence of certain construction technologies, such as the set-in sleeve, a necessary component of "truly form-fitting clothing," lacings along the side seams of the torso are the most likely explanation for the fitted shape of the dress (7). Netherton also points to the lack of conclusive evidence that this technique was universal, reminding us that there are relatively few examples of visible lacings in the artwork of the period (7). Perhaps the twelfth-century trend in lacing, which later disappeared, was limited to the nobility, much as was the "French" fashion of using great lengths of fabric.

The courtly literature that constitutes the subject of this study concerns itself almost exclusively with the nobility and often royalty, and therefore, the vast majority of the clothing that it describes or mentions belongs to noble characters. Although aristocratic dress was characterized, for the most part, not by different articles or cut of clothing, but rather by the materials used to produce the garment, the exception to this rule was the mantle, which was often fur lined. Only persons of a certain status possessed mantles, and these items were, it is believed, ceremonial garments, worn on occasions of some importance. Commoners wore cloaks, *chapes*, for warmth and protection, as did aristocrats when they were wearing their everyday clothing. Although many of the garments worn by members of the aristocracy were lined with fur, the type of fur used carried meaning.[10] Ermine has associations with

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real beauty of the soul (174–77). Serlon of Séez, Radbode of Noyon, Milon of Térouane, and Pierre le Chantre also speak out against the excessive use of cloth and adornment (Bourgain 300–303).

9. Camille Enlart tells us: "On appelait *orfrois* ou *orfrais* . . . des galons brodés et généralement larges; ils pouvaient avoir jusqu'à 20, 30, 50 centimètres de largeur. Sur un galon de soie ou de drap d'or ou d'argent, on faisait à l'aiguille des dessins d'ornement . . . L'Orient a fourni aux occidentaux une grande quantité de galons tissés de fil d'or et de soie à dessins variés autant d'élégants" (235).

10. Enlart notes that the most coveted furs required trade with often distant foreign locales, attesting also to the fact that this was a developing trend in the twelfth century: "La mode [d'apporter] ces fourrures se développa beaucoup au XIIe siècle, avec les progrès du commerce international. On se mit a l'importer d'Allemagne, de Norvège et même de Russie et de Sibérie" (229).

royalty and, in fact, was typically only worn on state occasions (Evans 10). The wearing of highly embroidered silks, such as samite, was reserved for ceremonial occasions, as well (10). The fine fabrics obtained through trade with the East were among the most prized for use in the construction of clothing for the nobility, but even nobles must have worn woolen garments every day, for the climate would have required it. The nobles would have had their clothing made of the finest wool, produced in northern France and in Flanders, areas whose economies owed much of their development and expansion to the booming cloth trade.

The Economy of Cloth

The economic situation in twelfth-century France was one of transition. Growth in the economy was the result of a number of factors, involving many social classes: changing aesthetic considerations among the princely class, the expansion of the merchant economy, and the increase of the number of laborers and the improvement of their techniques and equipment. The advances in technology of the twelfth century had a tremendous impact on the rapidly developing economy, producing surpluses of goods for less labor, and, according to Rondo Cameron, the "largest and most ubiquitous industry was no doubt the manufacture of cloth" (68).[11] Certain areas in Europe, such as Flanders, northern Italy, Tuscany, southern and eastern England, and southern France, specialized in the manufacture of cloth.[12] The cloth production of these regions included wool of different types and quality; linen (especially in France); and silk and cotton, whose production was limited to Italy and Muslim Spain (Cameron 69). From the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, Europe went from being primarily an importer to becoming an exporter as well, and cloth was vital to this

11. Roland Barthes notes the primacy of technological factors in determining dress when he claims that "la structure du vêtement réel ne peut être que technologique; les unités de cette structure ne peuvent être que les traces diverses des actes de fabrication, leurs fins accomplies, matérialisées" (*Système* 15).

12. Cameron notes that these areas had begun to specialize in textiles as early as the eleventh century (68–69). Pirenne confirms that the Italians of Lucca were manufacturing silk by the twelfth century, although their raw materials came from abroad, and that the manufacture of cloth was creating great wealth in the towns of Ghent, Bruges, Ypres, Lille, Douai, and Arras (33–36). Bloch situates the cloth centers in Flanders, Picardy, Bourges, Languedoc, and Lombardy (1: 113). Duby accentuates that the expanding cloth trade of the mid-twelfth century required a more specialized work force and affirms that this kind of specialization is possible only in large towns (*Guerriers* 266–69).

new status (Bloch 1: 113). The new ability to export cloth resulted from both increases in population and new agricultural technologies, especially in plowing, which yielded bigger and more frequent harvests and provided sustenance for more weavers, dyers, and cloth shearers than before (1: 113). The increase in the number of workers accompanied several technical innovations in the production of cloth that dramatically increased productivity at the beginning of the twelfth century: the horizontal treadle loom, replacing other, simpler looms; the spinning wheel, replacing the distaff; and the water-powered fulling mill (Cameron 69).

In addition to the technological advances being made in Europe, the Crusades figured prominently in the growth of the European economy. The main outcome of the supposedly religious wars was, in fact, commercial, that is, "a new culture and material prosperity, a vastly extended knowledge, a well-formed and far-reaching ambition" (Beazley 119). Besides occasioning the revival of economic exchanges, which had declined since antiquity, the Crusades enhanced the development of international communications, strengthened royal power, and facilitated the emergence of a new social class of merchants and artisans (Boucher 178). Economic growth produced an increasing awareness among the nobles of their clothing (Duby, *Guerriers* 262).[13] Duby explains this phenomenon well: "Dans l'espèce de paix qu'instaura l'établissement de la féodalité et que raffermit progressivement le renforcement désormais à l'extension des besoins des grandes maisons seigneuriales, à l'élévation progressive du niveau de la vie qu'on y menait, à l'aisance que procurait, à ceux qui exploitaient le droit de ban, l'accroissement constant des revenus, fondé lui-même sur l'expansion de la production rurale" (*Guerriers* 262). The French aristocracy thus found itself increasingly confronted with new types of expenditures.

The Crusades had also brought Europeans into contact with exotic civilizations rich in gold, marble, silk, and ivory through expeditions to Spain, southern Italy, and the Holy Lands and had expanded French tastes for luxury and better living conditions (Contamine et al. 154).[14] Deslandres observes: "La société du douzième siècle s'arrache petit à petit à une vie

13. Françoise Piponnier and Perrine Mane maintain that "le culte du paraître . . . s'inscrit dans l'idéal de largesse cultivé par la classe chevaleresque" (73).

14. Alison Lurie elaborates: "The crusaders who went to fight in the Holy Land . . . [brought] back to Europe a selection of exotic styles that became the rage of aristocratic Christendom: the Saracen turban, the pointed shoes of the Turks and the Jewish steeple headdress. The Crusades also introduced new colors such as azure and lilac, whose names preserve their Persian origin" (88–89).

Jacques Anquetil explains that the patterns and motifs of Eastern fabrics influenced not only European tastes in cloth but also designs used in many other decorative arts in Europe (22).

étroitement liée à la nécessité quotidienne" (101). The desire among nobles to display their wealth to the greatest extent that their means allowed spurred the further development of the merchant economy: "Sovereigns, prelates, the aristocracy, and, to some extent, the wealthier strata of the population required various sorts of articles and merchandise that could not be produced locally and thus had to be imported from other and at times distant places. Not only luxurious garments and stuffs, fine tableware, and other rarities to satisfy the governing elite's need for prestige, but also more ordinary merchandise was often furnished by the merchants who plied the waterways and the land routes" (Gurevich 243). The increased volume in trade required certain measures to improve the conditions in which it took place. The twelfth century saw the construction of many bridges (Bloch 1: 112). Moreover, trade between southern and northern Europe had become a reality, primarily because the Alpine mountain passes had been made safer.[15] Feudal lords had reduced the risk of bandits and improved the roads, religious brotherhoods had organized relay stations and rescue services, and professional companies of carters and muleteers provided transport facilities for traveling merchants (Cameron 65). Kings and princes were interested in commerce not only because it provided them with the goods they required to demonstrate their status, but also because it was a source of prosperity for them. In addition to levying tolls and duties on the mercantile activity facilitated by improved roads and bridges, they came to understand "l'importance vitale qui s'attache pour [eux] à la libre circulation des ordres et des armées" (Bloch 1: 112).

Of crucial importance to the emerging European economy were the merchant fairs of the Champagne region in France. Cameron explains:

> The fairs of Champagne emerged in the twelfth century as the most important meeting place in Europe for merchants from north and south. Under the protection of the counts of Champagne, who provided merchandising facilities and special commercial courts as well as protection on the road for traveling merchants, the fairs rotated almost continuously throughout the year among the four towns of Provins, Troyes, Lagny, and Bas-sur-Aube. Located roughly midway between Europe's two most highly developed

15. The Alps had presented a tremendous obstacle to trade in medieval Europe, especially as a result of avalanches, wild animals, a lack of maps, and the necessity of using pack animals (Mackay 131).

> economic regions, northern Italy and the Low Countries, they served as meeting ground and place of business for merchants from each; but they also played a role in the trade of northern Germany with southern France and the Iberian peninsula. The commercial practices and techniques that developed in these towns—for example, the "letters of fairs" and other credit instruments, and the precedents of their commercial courts—exercised an influence far broader and longer lasting than the fairs themselves. Even after their decline as commodity trading centers, they continued for many years to serve as financial centers. (65)

These huge commercial events, almost a year-round phenomenon, did a great deal to fuel the development of the European economy, and it is particularly interesting that one of the major categories of goods traded at the fairs was cloth and other goods necessary for the manufacture of luxury clothing.[16] It is perhaps no coincidence that Chrétien de Troyes, the major trendsetter in twelfth-century French literature and whose clothing signifying system is one of the most highly developed examples that we have, was so closely associated with the court of Champagne. This court benefited from its close proximity to the fairs and its protection of their trade practices, in terms both of economic gain and of access to luxury cloth and other rare and highly prized vestimentary materials. At these fairs, north met south, or, in terms of the clothing constantly represented in courtly literature, fur met silk, allowing also for east to meet west as the styles and materials from the east came to define the courtly dress of the western aristocracy. The situation was ripe for the expansion of the potential of clothing, both materially and representationally.

Raw Materials

The itinerant merchants, by building up trade networks with faraway cultures, incorporated foreign threads into the very fabric of everyday feudal life, as well as into its imagination. The new connections established as

16. Peter Spufford notes the importance of the fairs for banking, and especially international banking, since their trade was greatly facilitated with the advent of the bill of exchange, first as a notarized *instrumentum ex causa cambii*, some of which survive from the twelfth century, recording transactions between Genoa (where banking in Europe first arose) and the Champagne fairs (xxxi).

the result of the Crusades and the increased safety of passage bore the fruits of new raw materials for the manufacture and embellishment of clothing in France. The thick, massive forests of northern Europe and Russia provided great amounts of fur, some very valuable, such as sable, miniver, and ermine (Abbott 5). Vair and gris, also furs of Baltic origin, were made from the hides of squirrels; vair was made from whole squirrels and derived its name from the variation in color, unlike gris, which was made only from the gray back of the winter skins of the animals whence it gets its name (Veale 228). Russian furs, especially ermine, were more expensive, and therefore more desirable, than local furs, and the aristocracy monopolized these imported furs throughout the medieval period (Abbott 7). Scandinavian and Russian furs were "ceremonial wares, an insignia of wealth and standing" (Postan and Miller 169). Ermine had a strong association with the ideals of the nobility, for it was believed that the animal, rather than spoil its winter white coat, would kill itself; the animal's action echoed the bravery, virtue, and rarity to which the royalty aspired (Abbott 8). In courtly circles, a veritable "fur vocabulary," in Abbott's terms, grew up in which "'fur signs' were the highest expressions in a socioeconomic code" (5).

Fur may have been the most desirable lining for a garment belonging to an aristocrat, but silk was the fabric of choice. Unlike woolen fabrics, whose production was, for the most part, if not local, then of not so distant provenance, silk had exotic origins. Moreover, the fabric possessed aesthetic qualities unparalleled by "lesser" fabrics: "The special magic of silk stems from its interaction with light. . . . When light plays on a piece of silk, the weave appears, in turn, to glisten, change color, become moiré, lustrous, or matte. Silk is capable of such infinite metamorphosis that no adjective can describe it exactly" (Anquetil 7).

Silk's luminosity and rareness proved to be far more than the nobility of the twelfth century could resist.[17] The Crusaders had discovered new *soieries* whose products possessed a richness coupled with brilliant color and a high degree of ornamentation, and whose fineness seduced Europeans (Pinasa 67). Commercial relations with the Middle East expanded rapidly, conveying to Europe such exquisite fabrics as *cendal*, *paile*, *siglaton*, *osterin*, and samite (Pinasa 67).[18] In addition to this commercial activity with the Levant, by the end of the twelfth century, the Italians had begun to

17. Heller has examined the draw of luminosity and how light had become, by the early thirteenth century, a major feature of a glamorous image, in her essay "Light as Glamour."

18. *Cendal* was a lightweight silk similar to our modern taffeta, often red (Pinasa 67), and it was often used to line garments of silk or wool, as well as for making accessories and cushions

import raw silk from Asia for weaving. The Italian silk manufacture of the Middle Ages was first concentrated in Sicily (Muthesius, "Sicilian Silks" 165–66), where the invading Normans developed the craft both artistically and technically (Anquetil 24). At the end of the twelfth century sericulture and fine-figured silk weaving expanded to mainland Italy, particularly to Lucca (25). The Italians were expert dyers, often importing fabric from other places to finish it, particularly fine wool from Flanders and raw silk from the East (Bourquelot 212). Italian-finished cloths found their way to the rest of Europe through the intermediary of Venetian and Genoese traders who traveled with their goods to the merchant fairs (Anquetil 29–32). The Venetians had also cornered the import market for Eastern dyestuffs (Leix, "Medieval Dye Markets" 326) such as brazilwood (or sappan), indigo, and lacca (Leix, "Trade Routes" 317), while the Genoese practically held a monopoly over the importation of alum, the most important mordant for the dye trade (320). Woolen cloth from northern France and Flanders began to be exported to the East through the port of Genoa by the second half of the twelfth century (Pirenne 144).

The expansion of the cloth trade created a greater need for dyestuffs, for, with the exception of linen and hemp, almost all cloth was dyed. The most common dyes of medieval Europe were derived from local, usually vegetal, products, but some of the most desirable dyes, the ones used to color the most exquisite fabrics of the day, were produced from resources found as far away as India. However, although some Eastern dyes were

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(Piponnier and Mane 20). It is also believed to be a mixed silk, woven with other fibers to create more suppleness (Ditchfield 402).

Paile, sometimes referred to simply as imperial (according to Wingate), was a brocaded silk from Alexandria (Pinasa 67), which may have been striped. Robert Irwin, in his *Le Monde islamique*, argues that, in fact, some fabrics that carry the designation "d'Alexandrie" were not actually produced in that city but transported through its port on its way to Europe (159).

Siglaton was a "rich, heavy damask silk, usually ornately brocaded and often embroidered in gold" (Munro 23), produced throughout the Middle East, and used for garments of the highest luxury (Pinasa 67). It was later produced widely in Muslim Spain (Irwin 161).

Osterin was a purple silk from Byzantium, which had inherited the secret of the costly purple dye used for this fabric from the classical world (Pinasa 67). By the twelfth century, however, the availability of murex was diminishing if not exhausted throughout the region (Pastoureau, *Petit livre* 34); thus it is possible that references to this fabric in texts of the period rely upon a suspension of disbelief among their audiences in favor of a nostalgic view of what was actually available.

Samite was a weft-faced compound twill (Muthesius, "Silk" 343), woven in such a way as to create a pattern, often with gold or silver thread, and it was sometimes used as a base for embroidery. For a full discussion of medieval samite, see Anna Muthesius's chapter "From Seed to Samite: Aspects of Byzantine Silk Production," in her *Studies in Byzantine and Islamic Silk Weaving*. I thank Elena House for help with this description of samite.

in use in the northern parts of Europe, most of the wools were colored with native dyes (Leix,"Trade Routes" 321). Woad and madder were the most common dyes and came from northwest Europe (Postan and Miller 634). Woad, a blue dye also used as a base for other colors, was the most prevalent in the Middle Ages (Crowfoot, Pritchard, and Staniland 19). To increase color saturation with woad, dyers would draw the cloth through the dye bath multiple times: several times to achieve black, fewer to achieve blue, and still fewer to achieve green (Neuburger 338). Madder typically produced a warm brick-red color, although it could also produce peach, yellow, violet, brown, and tan, as well as boosting other colors such as green and blue (Crowfoot, Pritchard, and Staniland 200). Woad and madder were often used together to yield colors such as violet, sanguine, and burnet (Postan and Miller 634). The two other sources of red dye in the Middle Ages were not available in Europe and had to be imported from the East, at considerable cost: kermes, or cochineal, which produces a scarlet color and was used to dye only the finest of fabrics, and brazilwood (Crowfoot, Pritchard, and Staniland 200).[19] Other important dyes were weld, saffron, safflower, orseille, indigo, and lichen purple (Neuburger 338). Wold was also cultivated in Europe and, used alone, produced a yellow color that was not very much in demand, but when combined with woad, it yielded a desirable green color (Postan and Miller 634). To achieve a richness in color commensurate with the quality of a fabric such as silk, one needed expensive dyes, prized for the brilliance of color they achieve. The intense red color deriving from kermes, also called grain or scarlet, replaced purple as the royal color during the Middle Ages.[20] "L'écarlate adopte volontiers un rouge intense . . . à laquelle la théorie médicale des humeurs et de leurs correspondances attribue des qualités prophylactiques. Chargée de signification, écarlate devient l'insigne du pouvoir féodal" (Piponnier and Mane 72–73). Accordingly, the mantles given to knights on the occasion of their dubbing were cut from scarlet (73).

19. Although fabrics dyed with kermes are most often silks, John H. Munro points out that the "woolen scarlet was incontestably the most renowned luxury textile manufactured in medieval Europe, even if rivaled and often surpassed in value by oriental and Italian silks" (Harte and Ponting 14).

20. The recipe for imperial purple obtained from murex was lost to the West during the Middle Ages, and kermes, which was as difficult and costly to obtain, replaced it as the dye of choice, producing a red of a brilliance without equal. As Michel Pastoureau points out: "Pour l'oeil médiéval, l'éclat d'un objet (son aspect mat ou brillant) prime sur sa coloration: un rouge franc sera perçu comme plus proche d'un bleu lumineux que d'un rouge délavé. Un rouge vif est toujours un marqué de puissance chez les laïcs comme chez les ecclésiastiques" (*Petit livre* 35).

The Gift Economy

The ritualized gift typified by the dubbing ceremony holds a special position in the organization of feudal society.[21] In the twelfth century, at the same time that the mercantile economy was rapidly expanding, a different form of exchange, among the members of the nobility, was prevalent and even preferred—the gift economy. Feudal society was based on a system of reciprocal relations between persons of different social classes, and one of the most important means for solidifying these ties was gifts, and in particular, gifts of clothing, armor, or cloth: "Between equals or near-equals, cordial relationships were created and affirmed by the exchange of gifts. Between individuals or groups of differing status, the disparity of the exchanges both articulated and defined the direction and degree of subordination" (Geary 173).

Under feudalism, a vassal swore homage to a lord, who gave his protection in return, and often a gift from the vassal to the lord accompanied this exchange. "The goal of gift-giving was not the acquisition of commodities but the establishment of bonds between giver and receiver, bonds that had to be reaffirmed at some point by a countergift" (Geary 173). Following this initial gift, it behooved the lord to provide many gifts for his vassals. Indeed, "le seul vrai maître était celui qui avait donné" (Bloch 1: 251). Moreover, lords' "autorité était à la mesure de leur largesse, vertu majeure des dirigeants, indispensable" (Duby, *Trois ordres* 192). These feudal lords expressed their largess by hosting great feasts and through gifts of clothing:

> Être riche au XIIe siècle . . . obligeait . . . à donner . . . à ses amis, à les accueillir nombreux, à étendre aussi largement que possible la maisonnée, *à* [*les*] *parer*. . . Les cours, au centre de la seigneurie banale furent donc . . . des lieux d'accueil largement ouverts à tout venant; la plus grande gloire du maître était d'y distribuer les plaisirs, et ses largesses répandaient les plaisirs de la vie parmi ses hôtes, permanents et temporaires, comme parmi ses serviteurs (*Guerriers* 261–62; emphasis mine).

They also expressed their generosity less directly, namely in the hosting of tournaments, which often marked a significant social event, such as the marriage of a knight. Preparation for tournaments necessitated a tremendous

21. In fact, this attitude toward gifts is not confined to twelfth-century France; it is, as Marcel Mauss tells us, common in "archaic" societies for people to regard gifts as crucial markers of lines of mutual obligation (65).

expenditure and distributed wealth to the industries involved in equipping knights and providing entertainment. The lord paid for all the activities involved in tournaments, which, as Duby has noted, rarely if ever increased the monetary fortune of the host. Great lords

> combattaient sans cesse; leurs fils, dans les tournois, jouaient à combattre, et cette activité coûtait beaucoup plus qu'elle ne rapportait. Elle faisait couler très abondamment les deniers des mains des princes, les répandant parmi les petits chevaliers, parmi les éleveurs de chevaux, les fabricants d'armures, parmi tous les trafiquants et les amuseurs attirés par la foire très animée qui environnait chaque tournoi. C'était maintenant, par un complet retournement, la principale fonction économique de la guerre: non plus ajouter aux ressources de l'aristocratie, mais la pousser à dépenser davantage. (*Guerriers* 257)

All members of the aristocracy, including knights, needed to demonstrate largess, primarily because it most clearly distinguished them from other classes, whose concerns over money were greater. For knights, who had the military means to procure whatever they desired, and routinely did so, this need to demonstrate generosity was particularly strong. For members of this warrior class, as Bloch notes, "le gain est légitime. A une condition toutefois: qu'il soit promptement et libéralement dépensé. . . . A laisser couler entre ses doigts la fortune vite acquise, vite perdue, le noble croyait s'affirmer sa supériorité envers des classes moins confiantes dans l'avenir ou plus soucieuses de la calculer" (2: 44).

However, the ruling class did not perceive largess as an absolute social obligation. As is the case with the modern notion of charity, the nobles determined when, where, what, and to whom to give.[22] The privileged class had what Duby calls "des attitudes mentales qui jadis avaient été celles des rois," resulting in its members' refusal to engage in any form of exchange of wealth to which they had not freely consented (*Guerriers* 190). Moreover, the aristocracy refused "toute prestation qu'elle n'a pas consentie et n'accepte de se dépouiller de ses biens que par des dons gratuits et par des générosités mutuelles" (190). It is perhaps this attitude toward the distribution of wealth that kept the other classes worried about their future affluence. Yet the circulation

22. For a discussion of how during the twelfth century samite's dissemination was controlled through Byzantine imperial gift practices for the purposes of creating allegiances and bonds, see my forthcoming article "Superlative Silk: Samite and the Grail."

of luxury items surely constituted a source of further anxiety for the ruling class, since these gifts not only pleased the recipients but also helped to construct new social identities for them. As E. Jane Burns notes, "Clothing passed from the nobility to jongleurs, knights, or paupers marks the ruling elite as generous while also making recipients of aristocratic dress more courtly than their lineage or occupation would otherwise indicate" (*Courtly Love* 29). It is precisely because of the portability and exchangeability of clothing that it has the potential to create confusion by blurring demarcations of class, rank, and role (30). Largess expressed through clothing gifts thus served both to solidify social bonds and to ignite culture anxieties among the ruling elite by disrupting the continuity of the vestimentary code.

Although clothing gifts tend to be normative in their literary expression, primarily because of their important societal function as the material manifestation of social ties, there exists a more complicated interpretation of such clothing gifts, as evidenced by the gift of a scarlet mantle on the occasion of a knight's dubbing, to make my point. This expensive gift of clothing to newly dubbed knights usually accompanies a gift of armor, armor being the symbol of knighthood. This double gift, however, problematizes the straightforward symbolism of the act, in that it conveys the social necessity of conferring as much status as possible to knights, given their diminished role in society as a result of the movement from wartime to a more peaceful period. Knights, typically the younger sons of aristocratic families, possessing few if any land rights and therefore unlikely to marry, were, in fact, socially inferior to the lords to whom they swore their oaths of fealty. The combined gift of armor, the necessary accouterment for battle, and a mantle, the appropriate dress for a noble at court, confers both function and status upon the knight. Yet it is also an indication of the knight's need, indeed his lack, in his original situation. The double gift is analogous to what Umberto Eco refers to as a "surplus of expression" (*Theory* 270). In using a double signifier to confer status on its knights, twelfth-century French society has increased the informational possibilities of the message of the clothing gift. "The message has in effect become a source of further and unpredictable information, so that it is now semantically ambiguous" (270).

Play in the System: Consequences of the Expanding Economy

The expanding merchant economy certainly provided the nobility with the goods that it required, but this economy also had its drawbacks. Itinerant

merchants themselves represented a threat to the established order of the day since they tended to be strangers, culturally, religiously, and ethnically, heralding often from far-away lands and cultures (Reyserson 2–4). Bourquelot, in his seminal study on the fairs of Champagne, cites the extensive networks of mercantile activity that were established by the twelfth century and finds evidence of the presence of merchants from every part of Europe, from Scandinavia, and from the Orient at the fairs (133ff.). Reyerson also notes that even merchants who were not trading at a great distance from their own homes were perceived as strangers, because they did not participate in the "archetypical tripartite vision of medieval society: those who fought, those who prayed, and those who worked" (2). The increase of mercantile activity threatened the very fabric of feudal society because it defied the traditional social organization and rejected the values of the ruling class. Not only did its values conflict with those of the gift economy, but the peace required for its flourishing also had a destabilizing effect on the traditional military role that had defined the gentry's previous social superiority. For centuries, the landed nobility had passed their lands to eldest sons, and the other sons had preserved their nobility through chivalry, that is, by being knights. But war is a costly endeavor, and many nobles were exhausting their wealth in elaborate displays, involving, for example, clothing, gifts, and huge communal meals.[23] These ever-increasing expenditures necessary for preserving social status required many among the nobility to turn to credit (Kellogg, "Economic and Social Tensions" 15). The end of the twelfth century saw a financial crisis among the nobility caused by its increased indebtedness (15). Many baronial families began to mortgage their lands and villages to pay for the various goods and services required by their status: providing fiefs, dowries, and expenses for crusades or pilgrimages, as well as personal spending on clothing and the like (16). Moreover, the nobles had a powerful disdain toward any source of revenue that did not derive from their function as landholders. Their station prevented them from engaging in trade or in any other vocation, and thus they were unable to relieve themselves of the burden of debt. The commercial economy that developed during this period increasingly favored the merchant class, whose ethics did not place such a restriction upon their gainful activities.[24] The wealth of

23. The excesses of the nobility, inspired by a taste for the exotic through the exposure afforded by the Crusades, are charmingly described in Kraemer-Raine (26–27).

24. According to Beazley, medieval commercial practices were actually "superior to the ancient commercial activity in claiming greater privileges for the trader, in giving more attention to

many nobles was therefore becoming ever more unstable and, with a heavy reliance on credit, abstract.

The nobility placed a premium on the ability to distinguish social rank immediately from a person's dress, and according to Barnard, clothing constructs "visual identities for the different classes and thus . . . naturalize[s] the inequalities of wealth and power" (103–4).[25] The desire of nobles to maintain their absolute position in society gave rise both to the need to dress as well as their means afforded, and sometimes beyond those means, and later to the proliferation of sumptuary laws.[26] Sumptuary laws governed the consumption of luxury items and were often used as an attempt to control which classes wore which kinds of clothing, thereby preserving class distinctions.[27] Barnard claims that, in fact, sumptuary laws represent a governmental effort to "fix the meaning of . . . clothing," by deciding which clothing components were appropriate to particular social classes (75). The laws were also occasionally used "as a means of inducing people to save money" (Roach and Eicher 296), as well as a way to protect local industries from unfair competition from abroad (Deslandres 177). There are essentially no records of sumptuary laws in twelfth-century France, but laws governing the consumption of fine goods, including clothing items, would begin to appear early in the next century.[28] Alan Hunt defines sumptuary laws as

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freedom of trade intercourse, in undertaking more daring and speculative operations, and in devoting greater energy to the discovery of new markets" (119).

25. In medieval Europe, dressing above one's station, as the newly wealthy merchants were beginning to be able to do, was viewed as an illegitimate action, to use Peter Corrigan's term: "Clearly, the underlying assumption is that clothing *ought* to tell us something about the social world—we read it as if it did, hence the danger of illegitimately arrogated apparel in a world of rigid class differences" (437).

26. Elizabeth B. Hurlock explains the situation well: "In a feudal society where the lines of demarcation between classes was strictly drawn, the nobility displayed its superiority by abstaining from any form of productive labor. But as trade and commerce increased, and as the towns became the centers of wealth, the feudal lords found competition in the wealthy middle class, and, as a consequence were forced to set a new standard of differentiation[,] . . . conspicuous expenditure of money" (Roach and Eicher 295).

27. The ruling class was concerned uniquely with the usurpation of their status by classes just under their own. Deslandres points out that no sumptuary law ever had to stipulate that a peasant should not wear gold brocade, because his economic situation prevented such an acquisition and because such a garment would present an impediment to his everyday activities (177).

28. There is, however, a record of an edict handed down by Philippe–Auguste to his soldiers, prohibiting them from wearing "le vair, l'hermine et le petitgris" (Lériget 73). Bumke reminds us that the French king and Henry II of England were, at that time, 1188, preparing to set off for the crusade and that they "drew up a military code, which among other things, prohibited the crusaders from wearing costly fabrics during the expeditions" (129). Philippe–Auguste's reasons appear to have little to do with preservation of class distinctions and more to do with practical travel considerations.

a response among the ruling class to increasing uncertainty about the reliability of appearances:

> When economic change disrupts a "static" system of social relations emulation becomes an increasingly available strategy by which people lower in the social hierarchy attempt to realize their aspirations towards higher status by modifying their behavior, their dress and the kinds of goods they purchase. At the same time it becomes even more significant for the economically weakened nobility to resist these changes that express themselves in the frequently voiced anxiety about the difficulty of distinguishing between different categories of persons. (25)

In twelfth-century France, the increasing wealth of the merchant class, along with the indebtedness among the aristocracy, was beginning to create such a crisis. The codified system that had grown up naturally from technological, economic, and social factors was being called into question by new situations. The nobles wished to preserve the system in which their social status and financial situation were identical, but for many among them this was no longer the case. In the same way that medieval authors looked to antiquity as, in Roland Barthes's words, "une matière absolue qui est le trésor antique, source d'autorité" (*Aventure* 104), society looked to what remained of an absolute vestimentary system, and the symbols of wealth and status, such as fur and silk, which visually alluded to the secular authority of the nobility. Nobles wanted their dress to communicate clearly and unambiguously their socioeconomic status, but the absolute relationship between their status and monetary reality was rapidly changing. A system that had once been symbolic and thus motivated (because symbols have a relationship to what they symbolize, just as the medieval mind saw words as having an inherent meaning divinely ordained and derived) was suddenly encountering a system of arbitrary signs.[29]

The first true sumptuary law in post-Roman France seems to have appeared in 1229: "Une loi de 1229 défend aux comtes et barons de donner plus de deux livrées par an aux personnes de leur suite. Les écuyers domestiques ne pourront porter de vêtements dont le prix excède sept sous l'aune" (Giraudias 52).

29. The ultimate expression of the arbitrary system in clothing is fashion in the modern sense of the word, and although there are differing opinions as to when the rise of fashion occurs, only Ewing dates it before the thirteenth century. Her argument is based on the advent of lacing in the twelfth-century *bliaut*, which she considers to be a significant enough alteration of appearance to constitute fashion (18).

The introduction of arbitrariness, however contained, necessitated measures to preserve the integrity of the previous symbolic system. The play in the system of appearances echoes the play in the representational system: both are moving from static values toward a more dynamic form in much the same way that the economy was becoming ever more dynamic. The evidence of this play is perhaps never clearer than in the mechanics of the transition from a vestimentary code to a fully developed signifying system of clothing and in the transition from absolute meaning to contingent meaning for the clothing signifier.

Nobles, threatened by changes in the material world, looked to the writers of romance to entertain them and regale them with stories that glorified all that they treasured and believed themselves to embody. To illustrate his sympathy for the threatened nobility, the narrator of *Jaufre* suspends his tale for forty lines to deliver a diatribe condemning those who would wrongly appropriate the appearance of nobility, particularly since these usurpers do not adopt noble values:[30]

> Qe nu puesc esser tan jausens
> Can ne vei tan d'avol maneira,
> C'us fils de calqe camareira
> O de calqe vilan bastart
> Qe sera vengutz d'autra part,
> Can aura diners amassatz
> E es ben vestitz e causatz,
> Cuja tot la meilor valer.
> . . . .
> Aisi avols hom ben vestitz
> Es bels defor e dins poristz,
> E tut farsit de malvestat,

30. The romance of *Jaufre* is an Occitan work written in the south of France, dating most likely from the early thirteenth century. For the dating of the poem, see in particular Rita Lejeune's "La date du roman de *Jaufre*," her "A propos de la datation de *Jaufré*," and Paul Rémy's "A propos de la datation du roman de *Jaufre*." Although the romance postdates the primary period under consideration in this study, it is useful for inclusion for several reasons. First, it has been firmly established among scholars that the author of *Jaufre* was highly influenced, both in style and content, by the writers of romance in the north of France at the end of the twelfth century; see, for example, Tony Hunt's "*Texte* and *Prétexte*," Emmanuèle Baumgartner's "Le Défi du 'chevalier rouge,'" and Jean–Charles Huchet's "*Jaufre* et le Graal." Moreover, the *Jaufre* poet makes use of the same clothing signifying system discernable in the romances of his northern counterparts of the twelfth century.

Car aisin sun plen e enflat
Qe no lur pot dedins caber,
E fan lu deforas parer.

(vss. 2568–83, 2603–8)

[I really cannot be happy when I see so many lowborn people, when the son of a chambermaid or of some peasant bastard who comes from somewhere else—once he has gathered a little money and is well dressed with good shoes—thinks he is equal to the best of men. . . . A low but well-dressed man is handsome on the outside but is rotten on the inside and stuffed with dishonesty. They are so full and inflated with it that they cannot contain it inside, and it shows up on the outside.]

The writers fulfilled the desire of their patrons and audience but, true to the societal function of art, inscribed their works with the very changes that the nobles so feared. The mediation between a world of flux and the stability of the imagined past is readily apparent in the writers' treatment of clothing. They carry out their project by using clothing in a variety of ways and for a variety of ends through the development and elaboration of a dynamic signifying system that borrows its form from the absolute symbolism to which the nobles were accustomed while incorporating the ambiguity, ambivalence, and arbitrariness of the changing material world around them. The clothing system functions at three different levels in the text: writers elaborate character identity and states of being through descriptions of clothing; clothing interacts with the plot, sometimes motivating or precipitating events; and clothing contributes to the overall narrative structure of many romances. In every instance, however, the writers call upon their audience to interpret clothing signifiers in light of these signifiers' specific narrative contexts, in keeping with the aesthetic of *conjointure*; in light of the transition in the representational system from symbol to sign, and in light of the material reality that ultimately the nobles could no longer ignore or deny.