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Weaving Narrative

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DRESSING UP THE CHARACTER:
THE ELUCIDATION OF CHARACTERS THROUGH CLOTHING

IN A LITERARY TEXT, and arguably within all human societies, the primary function of clothing resides in the establishment of identity. This identity is a venture between the individual and his or her society. Mary Ellen Roach and Joanne Bubolz Eicher explain the importance of clothing and other vestimentary items for this process of identification: “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” (2). In twelfth-century France, a person’s appearance was believed to be an especially clear indicator of that person’s identity, since society placed a premium on the absolute conflation between appearance and reality. This ideal so predominated the thinking of the time that a veritable cult of appearance had established itself among the upper classes. Piponnier and Mane remind us that this kind of attention to appearance was part of the ideal of largess, meaning that those who had wealth flaunted it (73). The wealthy surrounded themselves and their entourages with every luxury they could afford and made gifts to those less fortunate. For a long time, the nobles had been the wealthiest members of society, their means beyond the grasp of any other class, but increasingly during the twelfth century their absolute domination of society was being put into question by the enrichment of the merchant class. Accordingly, nobles had for a long while been able to afford to dress themselves better, indeed to manipulate their appearance with greater ease, than any other class. Their initial financial ability to demand luxury goods from far away is ironically the very means by which the merchant class was increasing its own wealth: the trade of luxury items was making rich those who conveyed merchandise. Understanding that the ability to transform appearance through apparel opens up the possibility for appropriation of a different identity, nobles must have become wary of any manipulation of appearance beyond their immediate control, sensing its capacity to undermine their own

status. This fear explains their need to stabilize the vestimentary code and to create the illusion of the immutability of the code.

This desire for an absolute vestimentary code conflicts with the desire of writers inasmuch as rigidity limits creativity. I do not mean to suggest that restraint precludes imagination, just that too much limitation inhibits the ways in which creativity may be expressed. If creativity is defined as the capacity to invent new meanings, then a symbolic code can never be fully creative, because it bases itself on predetermined meanings that do not expand. The writers of romance in the twelfth century certainly used the vestimentary code, but they also pushed it to its limit and sometimes even transcended it. In their romances, they often set up the code to resemble its function in society, but they then used clothing to surpass and subvert the code. One of the primary uses of vestimentary imagery is for the development or elucidation of characters. A short discussion of the changing conception of character will be useful in providing both an analogy for and a better understanding of the ways in which the writers of the day were moving away from fixed, static conventions, and toward a more dynamic representation.

The literature that preceded the rise of romance, as well as the other literary genres of the period, tended to conceive of characters as “types.” The convention of types is a representational system that values the normative sociocultural role of stereotyped characters, instead of the elaboration of individual personalities. The characterization of these types is immutable and fixed; they are symbols with absolute and non-negotiable meaning. Although character types certainly exist in the romances, they do not dominate them, and they tend to be less important characters. Rather, in their elaboration of characters, the writers of romance often diverge from the highly conventional descriptions emblematic of those of character types and favor a more fluid system of representation that incorporates the more ambivalent and ambiguous property of signification. This divergence in descriptive practices necessarily, even purposefully, introduces dynamism into the art and gives rise to individualism in character development. One of the primary loci of this disturbance in the system lies in the description and depiction of characters’ clothing. Here again, there is a discernible movement in the representational system from a primarily static technique of description toward one that invites, even requires, interpretation. Like the characters who wear it, clothing is beginning to change from a set of stable absolute symbols to a system of contingent signs that must be understood in context.

Description

The art of description figures prominently for the medieval author of romance. Chrétien de Troyes and his contemporaries fill their texts with descriptions of characters, often including references to or descriptions of their clothing as well. The most obvious purpose of such descriptions is of course, as Alice Colby attests, to provide readers with a “clear picture of a person” (99). Colby also notes that portraits of characters, descriptions of some length that tend to relate the physical attributes of the character to his or her moral qualities, are highly conventional in romance (99), defining a portrait as a description of a character composed of at least twenty lines of verse and providing both physical and moral attributes (4–5). This conventionality has its origins in Horatian rhetoric, in which *descriptio* involves the elaboration of types that stress the general rather than the individual (Kelly, *Art* 53).

When writers of romance wish to represent characters who belong to the high nobility—and almost all the principal characters of such works fall into this category—they rely on certain vestimentary features that they describe in a very conventional manner. For the most part, the description extends only to the outer garments of a character’s outfit, that is, the *bliaut* and the mantle, generally described with the use of superlatives. In most cases, the *bliaut* is made of fine fabrics of exotic origins, and silk predominates. Additionally, the silk is often of a heavily decorated type, such as samite. The most common colors for these garments, if mentioned, are scarlet, green, or blue. Authors often describe in detail the mantle, a ceremonial garment designating high rank. Mantles, more often than not, have fur linings, the most precious being ermine.

Renaut de Bâgé, in his *Bel Inconnu*, provides a number of rather lengthy and highly conventional descriptions of clothing, some of which are part of character portraits that involve physical and moral features in addition to the clothing of a character.¹ Conventionality in these descriptions does not in any way imply that they are identical, for the details do vary, lending texture and richness to the text. The description of Blonde Esmerée as she appears for the first time in the text provides a fairly elaborate but very formally

1. In *Textus*, Romaine Wolf-Bonvin analyzes Renaut de Bâgé’s extensive use of female portraiture, calling the work “une longue série de portraits féminins, car la quête se déroule dans un monde où évoluent des demoiselles de plus en plus parées (149).

typical example of conventional clothing description. Renaut begins with the outermost garment, her mantle:

D'une vert popre estoit vestue;
 onques miundre ne fu veüe.
 Molt estoit riches ses mantials:
 deus sebelins ot as tasials;
 la pene fu et bonne et fine
 et si estoit de blanc ermine.

(vss. 3279–84)

[She was dressed in green silk; no better had ever been seen. Her mantle was very rich: it had two sables as tassels; its white ermine lining was good and fine.]

Blonde Esmerée is a queen, and it is therefore fitting that she wear a mantle. The fabric of her outfit is superlative and rare: *popre* is a type of imported silk usually produced in the Levant.² The ornamentation and lining of her mantle are costly furs, and the ermine underlines her status as a royal personage. The description continues its evocation of exotic embellishment with its depiction of the truly extraordinary clasps on her mantle:

Les ataces qui furent mises
 furent faites de maintes guises.
 Molt par faisoient a proisier:
 nes puet on ronpre ne trencier;
 ensi les ovra une fee
 en l'Ille de la Mer Betee.

(vss. 3285–90)

[The clasps that were upon it were intricately made; they were very worthy of praise and could not be broken or cut, so well they had been wrought by a fairy on the Island of Mer Betee.]

Not only are the clasps finely worked pieces of artistry, but they are also marvelous in nature, made by a fairy, with distant origins—the Dead Sea.

2. The term *popre* during this period is in fact a reference not to the fabric's color but rather to the type of fabric itself.

If the ermine trim and sable trim on her mantle left any doubts as to the rank and importance of this character, the rarity of the clasps makes her status apparent. The description of her *bliaut* reiterates and reinforces the royal imagery:

De cel drap dont li mantials fu
 fu li blials qu'ele ot vestu.
 Molt estoit ciers et bien ovrés;
 d'un ermine fu tos forrés.
 Plus de cinc onces d'or sans faille
 avoit entor le kieveçaille;
 as puins en ot plus de quatre onces.
 Par tot avoit asis jagonsses
 et autres pieres de vertu
 qui furent deseur l'or batu.

(vss. 3291–3300)

[The *bliaut* she wore was made from the same cloth as her mantle. It was very expensive and well made and was fully lined with ermine. More than five ounces of gold encircled the neck, and more than four ounces were around the wrists. All over, hyacinths and other stones of value had been set into the forged gold.]

The *bliaut's* description echoes that of the mantle: the *bliaut* is made of the same luxurious fabric with the same lining of royal fur, and the trim of the *bliaut* receives as much elaboration as the trim of the mantle. Blonde Esmerée's clothing accurately reflects her nobility. Moreover, their description is perfectly balanced, suggesting that she possesses the moral quality of balance and harmony among parts. Arthur will later recognize her merit and status when he honors her request that he bless her marriage to Guinglain.

Other clothing descriptions in *Bel Inconnu* tend to concentrate on a character's mantle or his or her *bliaut*, but not both. When Blanches Mains first appears in the story, Renaut describes only her mantle:³

3. Before launching into the description of her clothing, Renaut describes the lady's face, emphasizing the contrast between the whiteness of her skin and the redness of her lips. Wolf-Bonvin discusses this color contrast in terms of the richness of its lexical fields and symbolic meanings and associations dating from antiquity on, an analysis she continues with later descriptions of Blaches Mains in black and white (*Textus* 163–74).

Ele estoit d'un samit vestue;
 onques si bele n'ot sous nue.
 La pene en fu molt bien ouvree,
 d'ermine tote es[che]keree;
 molt sont bien fait li eschekier;
 li orles fist molt a pris[ier].

(vss. 2245–50)

[She was dressed in a samite; never was one so beautiful seen under heaven. The edging was very beautifully fashioned from checkered ermine; so well was the checkering executed that the border was very worthy of praise.]

He specifies the fabric as samite, even the finest samite, a costly silk, usually heavily decorated with gold and obtained from the Levant or Muslim Spain. The mantle's ermine trim of northern provenance and the quality of the work in the creation of the checkered design are both indicative of the royalty of the garment's wearer. In this single garment, the cultural east meets west, and the geographic north meets south, all to be assembled with great care and purpose in the center of the imagined chivalric world—the Arthurian domain. This rather short description very efficiently communicates Blanches Mains' status and situates her at the very heart of chivalry. Later, when Guinglain returns to Blanches Mains and finds her riding out for a hunt, the text indicates that she has removed her mantle because of the heat—"Son mantiel osta por le caut" (vs. 3967)—but goes into a short description of her *bliaut*:

ele avoit vestu un bliaut
 ki tos estoit a or batus.
 Plus rices dras ne fu veüs;
 ovrés estoit et bien et bel.

(vss. 3968–71)

[She had donned a *bliaut* that was made entirely of forged gold. A more rich fabric has never been seen; it was well and beautifully fashioned.]

This fabric, like the one used for her mantle, is exquisite and rare. The cloth, with its use of gold in the weave, could be a brocade or a samite, both

of which are imported fabrics. Regardless of the origins of the fabric, which remain unclear from the description, its quality and rarity befit a queen.

The mantle was the only specifically noble garment of the twelfth century, and there are three additional exceptional mantles that appear in *Bel Inconnu*. To reconcile with Guinglain, Blanches Mains sends him the gift of a beautiful mantle made of two different exquisite fabrics, a Persian *osterin* and a *diaspre*, and lined with two different costly furs, Hungarian miniver and ermine.⁴ Later, Blonde Esmerée goes into Arthur's court for the first time wearing a mantle of Middle Eastern cloth upon which all the wild beasts on land and from the sea are depicted in gold embroidery.⁵ Both

4. Une robe aporte molt bieie
partie de deus dras divers:
de soie d'un osterin pers
et d'un diaspre bon et biel.
La pene qui fu el mantiel
refu molt de rice partie,
de rice vair de vers Hungrie;
l'autre d'ermine bon et fin,
ki estoit d'un rice osterin,
et li vairs el diaspe estoit.
Un molt rice seble i avoit
dont li mantials estoit orlés.
Molt estoit li dras bien ouvrés
de coi estoit fais li mantials.
Ja mar querrés deus dras plus bials
que cil de cele reube estoit,
molt bien andoi s'entravenoient.

(vss. 4230–46)

[She was carrying a beautiful robe made of two different fabrics: one of a Persian *osterin* silk, the other a good and beautiful *diaspre*. The lining of the mantle was made of very rich parts, one a rich miniver from Hungary, the other a good and fine ermine that lined the rich *osterin*, and the vair lined the *diaspre*. The mantle was adorned with a very rich sable. The fabric from which the mantle was made was highly worked. Never were there seen two fabrics more beautiful than those from which the robe was made, and the two went together perfectly.]

5. Illueques se fait atoner
de chiere reube d'outre mer
qui tant estoit et bieie et riche
qu'en tot le mont n'ot cele bisse—
caucatri, lupart, ne lion,
ne serpent volant, ne dragon,
n'alerion, ne escramor,
ne papejai, ne espapemor,
ne nesune bieste sauvage
qui soit en mer ne en bocage
que ne fust a fin or portraite.
Molt estoit la roube bien faite!

these garments are exceptional. Guinglain's mantle is carefully designed to achieve a balance and harmony of disparate but luxurious parts, while Blonde Esmerée's mantle is nothing less than a marvel. Despite the truly extraordinary quality of these garments, their descriptions remain conventional because they in no way challenge assumptions. The superlative, the hyperbolic, and even the marvelous are standard features of medieval descriptions. Reginald Abbott makes it clear that the audience expected to be dazzled by such elaboration (9).

However, the third remaining description of a mantle does call convention into question. When Blanchés Mains comes to pay a midnight visit to Guinglain, she comes dressed in a magnificent mantle:

Sans guimple estoit eschevelee
 et d'un mantiel fu afublee
 d'un vert samit o riche hermine.
 Molt estoit bele la meschine!
 Les ataces de son mantiel
 de fin or furent li tasiel.

El mantiel ot pene de sable
 qui molt fu bone et avenable.
 Li orles estoit de pantine:
 (Ço est une beste mairine;
 plus souef flaire que canele.
 Ainc ne fist Dius beste si biele.
 Dalés le mer paist la rachine
 et porte si grant medechine,
 qui sor lui l'a ne crient venin
 tant le boive soir ne matin.
 Mius vaut que conter ne porroie.)
 Et d'une çainture de soie
 a or broudee tot entor
 si s'en estoit çainte a un tor
 molt cointement la damoisele.

(vss. 5143–69)

[There she had herself adorned with a costly robe from overseas that was so beautiful and rich that in all the world there was no beast—crocodile, leopard, or lion, flying serpent or dragon, eagle or *escramor*, popinjay or *espapemor*, or any other wild beast whether in the sea or forest that was not depicted there in pure gold. The robe was beautifully made! The mantle had a sable lining that was very good and went well with it. The trim was of pantine (this is a sea creature which gives off a scent nicer than cinnamon. God never made a beast so beautiful. It eats the herbs by the sea and has such medicinal effects that he who wears it need fear no venom drunk day or night. I cannot tell you how much it is worth.) And a silk *ceinture* embroidered with gold all the way around, the maiden tied around her waist to beautiful effect.]

Desus sa teste le tenoit;
 l'orlé les la face portoit:
 li sebelins, qui noirs estoit,
 les le blanc vis molt avenoit.

(vss. 2395–2404)

[Without a wimple, her hair was loose, and she was dressed in a mantle of green samite lined with fine ermine. The young lady was very beautiful! The tassels on the laces of her mantle were of fine gold. She held it [the hood] over her head; she wore the border around her face: the sable, which was black, accented well the white of her face.]

Once again Renaut dresses a character in a samite mantle lined with ermine and trimmed in sable, with clasps of the finest gold. Thus far the description is as conventional as anything we have seen, and it draws a parallel between the beauty of the garment and the beauty of the lady, also a convention in romance. But, in the lines that follow, an unanticipated, even shocking, element of the description emerges:

N'avoit vestu fors sa chemisse,
 qui plus estoit blanche a devise
 que n'est la nois quis ciet sor branche.
 Molt estoit la cemisse blanche
 mais encore est la cars molt plus
 que la chemisse de desus.
 Les gambes vit: blances estoient,
 qui un petit aparissoient.
 La cemisse brunete estoit
 envers les janbe[s] qu'il veoit.

(vss. 2405–14)

[She had only donned her *chemise*, which was more white than the hazel flower sitting on its branch. The *chemise* was very white but the flesh beneath the *chemise* was far whiter. He saw her legs: white they were, the little that showed. The *chemise* seemed dark brown compared with the legs he saw.]

Blanches Mains is wearing nothing but her *chemise* under this stylized, ceremonial garment! The mantle, the ultimate symbol of wealth and

status, is being sexualized by the suggestive nature of the description of this lady in her *chemise*. There is little doubt that a well-crafted mantle of luxurious, pleasing materials has a seductive quality, but seldom is that seductiveness extended into an explicitly sexual content. The total contrast between the outermost garment, particularly one used primarily on distinctly public occasions, and the garment that is essentially equated with nudity in the twelfth century creates an unusually dynamic description.⁶ Moreover, the image of this scene marks Guinglain, for he has recurring dreams about it. Blanches Mains is herself a highly unconventional character, but this description of her clothing gives her character even more interest, precisely because it challenges the audience's assumptions about how a lady should dress. She becomes more vibrant, more alive, thereby surpassing her rival, Blonde Esmerée, in the minds of both the audience and the hero. In this way, Renaut uses clothing not only to develop the character of Blanches Mains but also to enhance the dynamism of the work as a whole.⁷

The descriptions of clothing in *Bel Inconnu* serve a greater narrative function, but most are nonetheless highly conventional in form and placement, with the notable exception of Blanches Mains' ensemble in her midnight visit to Guinglain. This dynamic description bears witness to the existence of the kind of play in the representational system that is characteristic of and necessary for the slow transition from an absolute symbolism to a more fluid signifying system. In this particular case, the public symbols of wealth and status—the individual features of the mantle along with the mantle itself—merge with the symbol of nudity, that is, the *chemise*, to form a dynamic image that is highly context dependent. Were Blanches Mains to wear this costume in public, she would no doubt look ridiculous and possibly incur some degree of scorn. The two symbols would negate each other. Instead, she wears her unusual ensemble to seduce a knight, and it works, because of the juxtaposition

6. A similar description occurs in Chrétien's *Chevalier de la charrete*, in which Guenevere comes dressed for her tryst with Lancelot in a pure white *chemise* directly under a luxurious mantle of fine scarlet cloth and marmot fur (vss. 4574–82). For an analysis of Chrétien's scene, see my article "What Was Arthur Wearing?" Like the image of Blanches Mains in her *chemise* and mantle, this image of Guenevere is clearly sexualized, especially since she is on the verge of committing adultery with Lancelot.

7. Commenting upon the many female outfits presented throughout the text, Wolf-Bonvin writes: "La galerie de portraits féminins présents dans le *Bel Inconnu* n'a donc rien d'insignifiant. En marquant une pause dans le récit entre passé et future, ils effectuent une mise au point où sont visualisés les lignes de forces du moment, concentrées en une sorte de résumé virtuel. Placés au seuil des épisodes marquants, ils annoncent les directions de lecture antérieurement à toute avancée de la narration" (*Textus* 209).

of symbols in the particular context. Her outfit requires interpretation, which Renaut supplies: his description takes on an increasingly suggestive tone, evoking her body and bare legs, to leave no doubt that this description is meant to sexualize the wearer of the strange outfit. Throughout the text of *Bel Inconnu*, Renaut uses conventional clothing descriptions to demonstrate the nobility of his characters, sometimes pushing his descriptions toward the marvelous, but in the description of Blanchés Mains' nighttime visit, he introduces so much vestimentary contrast that he must provide supplemental imagery to assist the reader in interpreting the textual ambivalence.

Similarly, the *Enéas* poet, in two parallel descriptions of the lady warrior Camille, inscribes textual ambivalence with regard to her gender.⁸ The contrasting image of Camille, first dressed in elegant feminine attire and later fully armed for battle, is not simultaneously achieved as is Blanchés Mains' description, but must evolve over the course of the romance. The poet describes Camille in great detail when she makes her first appearance in the romance, explaining that she has a dual nature. She is both king and queen, pursuing typically masculine activities by day and being attended by women by night (vss. 3977–81). Although the poet prepares his audience for the later depiction of her fully armed, he first describes her physically in her feminine aspect, thereby easing his audience toward the image of her as a knight. In this initial description, the poet emphasizes her extreme beauty and lovely clothing. Both her *bliant* and mantle are made of *porpre*, and the mantle's lining is in a checkered design using ermine and red martin, indicating her wealth and status. However, certain details of the two garments indicate marvelous origins:

la porpre fu a or broudee,
 par grant entante fu ovree:
 trois faees serors la firent,
 an une chanbre la tisserent;
 chascune d'els s'i essaia
 et son savoir i demonstra
 et firent i poissons marages,
 oissiaus volanz, bestes salvages.

(vss. 4011–20)

8. Of interest is the fact that the name Camille is nongendered in Old French, which further adds to the gender ambivalence of this character. She is clearly of the female sex, sex being a physical trait, but her gender, that is her socially assigned role, is less clear.

[The *porpre* was embroidered with gold, worked with fine expertise: three fairy sisters made it, in a room they wove it; each one of them tried to demonstrate her mastery in it, and depicted sea fish, flying birds, and savage beasts upon it.]

The fabric from which this outfit is cut provides yet another example of an already exotic fabric, *porpre*, elevated to the level of a marvel through the mystical craft of the design. In a friendly competition to do the best work, fairy sisters depicted a bestiary of animals upon the fine fabric. While the designs on the fabric of the *bliaut* have been carried out by otherworldly creatures, the trim of her mantle is actually made from a magical creature:

li orles fu mervoilles bias
 et fu de gorges d'un oisiaus
 ki sollent pondre al fonz de mer
 et sor l'onde sollent cover;
 cent toises covent an parfont;
 de si chaude nature sont
 que, se desus lor les ardoient;
 bien fu orlez de ces oisiaus,
 desi qu'a terre li mantiaus.

(vss. 4035–44)

[The border was marvelously beautiful, made from the throat of a bird that likes to lay its eggs at the bottom of the sea and brood them on the waves; they brood them sometimes at a hundred fathoms deep; their nature is so hot that if they sit on them, they will burn them with their heat. Of these, her mantle was handsomely bordered to the ground.]

The exotic rarity of her clothing perfectly reflects Camille's quality as an extraordinary personage, but there is, as yet, no firm indication of her femininity, since neither the cloth nor the marvelous embroidery indicates gender in any way. An earlier quatrain of the description introduces the expressly feminine quality of her image:

Vestue an fu estroitement
 dessus fu ceinte cointement

d'une sozceinte a or broudee;
 menuëment ert botonee.

(vss. 4007–10)

[She was attractively dressed with a tightly cinched overbelt embroidered with gold; and she was skillfully laced into her gown.]

In keeping with the style at the time of the writing of this romance, Camille wears her dress tightly laced at the sides. The fitted shape of her *bliaut* combined with the intricately embroidered and decorated sash accentuates the shape of her body, and the poet makes sure that the shapeliness of her body is visible when he specifies that she leaves her mantle open to reveal her right side: “Ele an ot antroverz les pans, / qu li parut le destre flans” (She had slightly opened the side, which allowed her right side to be seen) (vss. 4045–46). In this initial and rather lengthy description of Camille, the poet clearly asserts both Camille’s social rank and her femininity, but Camille’s uniqueness goes well beyond any trappings of wealth, status, and beauty. She is also a female knight. The full articulation of her personal and vestimentary fortitude occurs almost three thousand lines later, as Turnus comes upon her:

Iluec a Camille trovee
 ou el l’atendoit tote armee;

 et el fu bien aparueillie

 Apoiee fu sor sa lance;
 a son col avoit son escu;
 o bocle d’or d’ivoire fu,
 et la guige an estoit d’orfois.
 Ses haubers ert blans come nois
 et ses hiaumes luisanz et clers,
 de fin or ert toz par carters;
 la coife del hauberc fu faite
 en tel maniere qu’ele ot traite
 sa bloie crine de defors
 que el li covri tot lo cors.

(vss. 6907–8, 6914, 6922–32)

[He found Camille there, where she awaited him fully armed . . . and she was well attired. . . . She was leaning on her lance; at her neck was her shield with an ivory-and-gold shield-boss and a grip made of orphrey. Her hauberk was white like the hazel flower and her helmet was glittering and bright, made with fine gold in all the quarters. The headpiece of the hauberk had been made so that she could pull her blond hair through to the outside, and it covered her whole body.]

The lovely, exquisitely attired woman who dazzles with her beauty and unusual clothing is thus transformed into a fully armed knight, ready for battle. Moreover, in the same way that, in the first description, the poet alludes to Camille's masculinity even as he gives a distinctly feminine description of her, here he accommodates her femininity with the specially made hauberk that allows her long hair to flow while he shows her in her most masculine aspect. This image completes the description of Camille begun much earlier when the poet informs us of her vocation, and the two depictions become one extended, dynamic description. Taken as one description, the image focuses on clothing as a means to embed Camille's gender ambivalence into her textual representation.

Both the depiction of Blanches Mains and that of Camille inscribe some sort of ambivalence into the textual representation of character through contradictory vestimentary imagery: in Blanches Mains' case, it calls sexual imagery into question, whereas in Camille's case, it is gender ambivalence. The first time the character Enide appears in the text of *Erec et Enide*, Chrétien introduces ambiguity with regard to social class in her description. Although Enide's family has been reduced to poverty, the family is noble, and Chrétien beautifully depicts the tension between her outer poverty and her inner nobility through a very unconventional and nearly shocking description of her clothing. The diminished economic condition of certain members of the nobility in the second half of the twelfth century makes Enide's situation quite believable, and in her portrait, Chrétien represents this social reality with artistry: he shows her reduced state rather than simply relating it, while evoking her absolute beauty and nobility. That she is poorly dressed creates a dramatic contrast with her social rank:

et sa fille, qui fu vestue
d'une chemise par panz lee,

delïee, blanche et ridee.
 Un blanc cheïnse ot vestu desus;
 n'avoit robe ne mains ne plus,
 et tant estoit li chainses viez
 que as costez estoit perciez.
 Povre estoit la robe dehors,
 mes desoz estoit biax li cors.

(vss. 402–10)

[As did her daughter who was dressed in a *chemise* of wide cloth, fine (threadbare), white, and creased (wrinkled).⁹ She wore over it a white *chainse*; she had no other clothes. And so old was the *chainse* that it was worn through at the sides. Poor were the clothes on the outside, but the body beneath was beautiful.]

Over her worn *chemise*, Enide wears but a tattered *chainse*. The *chainse* is a dress normally worn on very informal occasions and in the home, but in this case, Enide's family is receiving one of Arthur's knights (and a king's son) into their home. The lack of a *bliaut* to cover her *chainse*, especially in circumstances that merit it, clearly indicates the family's poverty. Enide is inappropriately dressed, and this fact creates a great deal of tension in the text.¹⁰ This discord between Enide's state of dress and her social status, like the discrepancy between the two parts of Blanches Mains' outfit and the contrast between Camille's image as a woman and as a knight, inscribe vestimentary ambivalence into the text.¹¹ For the noble audience hearing of

9. The precise meaning of "delïee" here is a matter of some dispute. David Staines translates it as "threadbare" to emphasize the poor condition of it, but most other translators have chosen to translate it as "fine," emphasizing instead that the garment at one point, like the family's fortune, was in much better shape. I have included both readings here.

Again, "ridee" has posed problems for translators, many of whom translate it as "pleated." To my knowledge, a pleated *chemise* was not common or practical, and I therefore prefer a reading that incorporates instead the notion of a well-worn and wrinkled garment to one that would give Enide's *chemise* a more exotic association.

10. Kelly points out that once Enide receives the queen's gift of clothing, she must spend the rest of the romance acquiring the attributes of wife, princess, and queen ("Art" 198–99). Although at first Enide's lack is material and her attributes as noble sufficient, once the queen has dressed her, the situation is reversed. She must then grow into her clothes.

11. Interestingly, Erec arrives at Enide's father house also inappropriately dressed for his task. At the beginning of the romance, he sets out with the queen dressed in courtly attire (vss. 95–104). His manner of dress becomes inappropriate when a knight's dwarf slaps the handmaiden of the queen and Erec must avenge her. He regrets his lack of armor because it prevents him from completing his task right away. Erec's inappropriate dress prefigures Enide's.

Enide's plight, however, the instability of her situation was surely dramatic; the nobles threatened by the enrichment of the merchant class could have easily imagined themselves in a similar situation, whether such a possibility was remote or not. Fortunately for both the heroine and her family, Erec decides to marry her, thereby restoring wealth to his in-laws.¹² This development undoubtedly allayed the fears and unease that the unconventional initial portrait of Enide caused the audience to experience. Nonetheless, the description had its effect, and although Chrétien reassures his listeners and readers and reaffirms their status, he has forced them to face a material reality. Moreover, Enide's portrait is nothing less than a subversion of the vestimentary code of the period. Regardless of what Chrétien does for these characters later in the text, he has made a fissure in the wall of the impermeable representational world and has paved the way for other transgressions to follow.

Later, in his *Conte du Graal*, or *Perceval*, Chrétien again uses a contradictory vestimentary image, but inverts it. Whereas Enide makes her entrance into the text dressed beneath her noble station, when we see Blancheflor for the first time, she is dressed well beyond her current means. This first image of Blancheflor, the lady who becomes Perceval's love, as Douglas Kelly puts it, "contrasts person [again, represented through clothing] with dwelling" ("Art" 205). The first view we have of Blancheflor in her besieged castle communicates a strangely contradictory image:

Ses mantiax fu, et ses bliiaus,
 D'une porpre noire, estelee
 D'or, et n'estoit mie pelee
 La penne qui d'ermine fu;
 D'un sebelin noir et chenu,
 Qui n'estoit trop lons ne trop lez,
 Fu li mantiax au col orlez.

(vss. 1798–84)

[Her mantle and her *bliaut* were of black *porpre*, starred with gold, and the fur lining, which was of ermine, was not the least bit worn;

12. Wolf-Bonvin argues that Enide's tattered state of dress should be understood as an exemplification of the corrupt and degraded texts that Chrétien says he will restore through his *molt bele conjointure*, just as Erec will restore status and wealth to Enide's family, and that, at the conclusion of the romance, when the tale has been restored to its full glory through Chrétien's artistry, Erec's coronation robe should be read as the textual emblem of Chrétien's success (*Textus* 13).

the mantle's collar was adorned with a black, thick sable that was neither too long nor too wide.]

This description of the lady's clothing seems wildly disconnected from the physical reality of her present situation: she and her people are on the verge of starvation, but Blanchefflor is dressed like the wealthiest of queens. Reginald Abbott examines this passage in detail, placing it in the historical and cultural setting necessary for interpretation of the meaning that this luxurious garment would have carried for Chrétien's twelfth-century audience: "Blanchefflor's robe is brand new and an exact length to suit her. Newness and exact fit are here characteristics of garments lined with a fur (ermine) used conservatively even by those (royalty) with every right (duty) to wear it and the means to acquire it. Blanchefflor is the ruler of a city besieged" (9). Abbott notes that despite the siege of the lady's castle, she still manages to find the means to procure for herself the ermine fur whose origins are as far away as Russia (9). The fact that her tailored garment was made just for her, according to Abbott, confirms that it was not "a royal hand-me-down or second-hand garment" (9). This costume is of the utmost splendor: "When Perceval meets Blanchefflor, she is attired in a robe befitting the highest royal personage at a ceremonial occasion, a robe of great price and rarity, exactly tailored to fit her, and brand new. . . . For the medieval reader, this is the stuff of legend" (9). Abbott goes on to claim that the hyperbolic nature of Blanchefflor's clothing in this description is part and parcel of Chrétien's need to dazzle his aristocratic audience, presumably themselves dressed in fine clothing, with a show of bravura bordering on one-upmanship (9). He does provide ample and convincing evidence that Blanchefflor's robe is at best an unlikely historical garment, if not completely impossible, given the lady's current situation.¹³ However, the implication of Blanchefflor's dress may be extended much further than Abbott is willing to take it.

Kelly remarks that Blanchefflor's description is highly conventional in and of itself, but that it contrasts greatly with the current state of her dwelling and affairs ("Art" 205). He asserts that this seemingly incongruous description is actually necessary for the plot because Blanchefflor's beauty is what inspires Perceval to perform his precocious defeat of her enemy, thereby liberating her city (205). In other words, Perceval's hyperbolic

13. His evidence is based on trade records, royal inventories, and commissions of actual royal garments during the twelfth century and beyond.

performance on the battlefield requires Blanchefflor's hyperbolic beauty, and a major component of her beauty is her clothing. Blanchefflor is, at this point in the text, an idealized woman, and her clothing is more than symbolic: it is instrumental. The splendor of her dress helps to accomplish her goal of liberating her castle. The seductive power of such an ideally and beautifully adorned woman assures her success in engaging Perceval to champion her cause.

Abbott contends that he and Kelly disagree on the interpretation of Blanchefflor's robe (14–15n12), but, in fact, their arguments are not contradictory. Abbott suggests that the perfectly unrealistic quality of the garment's existence in such circumstances pushes the limits of credibility and that the noble audience is pleased by the garment's very unlikelihood and hyperbolic rarity. Kelly argues that Blanchefflor's beauty, a prominent feature of which is this extraordinary garment, inspires Perceval to perform an equally extraordinary feat that no one before him could accomplish, even with many men. Both arguments point to the exceptional quality of the garment and its unique ability to please and inspire. In short, the garment is an unattainable ideal and carries with it the full seductive appeal of such a rare and exquisite object. The description of Blanchefflor's dress in its specific narrative context provides an example of a more dynamic type of description so that what would have otherwise been a pause in the narrative actually creates tension, through such obvious contrast, and moves the action forward. The highly symbolic nature of the garment that Abbott characterizes as denoting nothing short of the highest level of royalty is problematized by the surroundings in which the wearer finds herself. Inserted into this scene of destitution is a character of extreme beauty, unscathed by the war around her, whose clothing's symbolism is potent but out of place. The French aristocrats of the twelfth century certainly could have seen themselves in this portrait. The economic climate in which they found themselves increasingly favored the merchants, whose social status did not preclude them from profiting from trade, just as the siege of Blanchefflor's castle was more favorable to her enemies than to her. Chrétien accounts for the changing system in this description, calling it into question through what could be viewed as the utter absurdity of Blanchefflor's dress (which mirrors his status-conscious noble audience), but he ultimately reasserts the value of her vestimentary display by allowing Perceval, once inspired by her beauty, to defeat her enemies. Chrétien leads the aristocracy toward accepting the changing economic situation around them by inscribing its

fluctuating valences in his romances in an inoffensive, even pleasing, way.¹⁴ Here, then, Chrétien places a dress whose symbolic value is absolute into an incongruous setting and reestablishes the order of the system around his play. He has once again subverted the vestimentary code of the period and then reassured his audience of its efficacy. Through the agency of his hero, Chrétien restores Blancheflor to her prior station as lady of her domain, and with this change in her situation, her lavish dress becomes once again appropriate. He has nonetheless forced his noble audience to face an undesirable material reality: their position is subject to outside threats. Moreover, their capacity to imagine themselves unequivocally as the heroes of society through the mediation of romance is no longer without threat. The play in the system requires the audience to interpret more than the clothing sign: it requires the nobles to reinterpret their own world.

Identity and Disguise

In addition to using clothing effectively as class markers within a literary text, the writers of twelfth-century romance capitalize on the identificatory role of clothing in ways other than description, and often make mention of clothing as a type of shorthand to indicate a character's class affiliation in very few words while still lending richness and detail to the text. The vestimentary code of twelfth-century France was a code by which individuals associated themselves with a faction of society, such as a certain class, rank, role, economic situation, and so on.¹⁵ Perhaps the most extreme example of identification of characters uniquely in their social roles occurs in the *Roman de Thèbes*. The poet of this romance has a propensity for depicting knights through a synecdochic representation, most often referring to them as "shields." At one point, however, the author extends his synecdoche and refers to knights by naming other parts of their equipment as well. The poet describes the knights that Capaneüs brings with him into battle:

14. Judith Kellogg argues this point in her article "Economic and Social Tensions Reflected in the Romances of Chrétien de Troyes." Her argument centers specifically on economic considerations, which sometimes involve clothing but often not.

15. Roach and Eicher point to the expressive quality of clothing, which can express affiliations with social groups and the values and standards belonging to them. Clothing "divulges something about each human being—his beliefs, his sentiments, his status and rank, his place within the power structure" (6).

Tant bel houme ot en sa compaingne
 tant bon escu de l'or d'Espaingne
 tant bon hauberc menu maillié
 tant entreseing bien entaillié

(vss. 4781–84)

[So many great men he had in his company, so many good shields of Spanish gold, so many good hauberks finely mailed, so many well-engraved insignia.]

The knights in this passage have no individualized identities, and the poet makes no effort to humanize them. The principal characters of his romance are all noble, and most are royal. The knights who make up the two warring brothers' armies are necessary for the narrative, but their identities are not. Their narrative role is limited, as is their social role, to that of warriors, and the most visible part of that role has much less to do with their humanity than with their ability to operate their equipment. This hyperassociation between the knights and their social role obscures their personal identities and underlines clothing's innate capacity to reveal and conceal simultaneously. Here, the armor clearly and unequivocally reveals the social identity of its wearers but conceals their personal identity in order to overemphasize and even equate them with their social role.

The use of clothing to represent a person's high status within society is apparent in several passages in the corpus of verse romance of the period.¹⁶ In Chrétien's *Cligés*, Arthur's court recognizes simply by their appearance that Alexandre and the twelve counts and princes accompanying him are the sons of kings:

Ne cuident pas que il ne soient
 Tuit de contes et de roi fil,

16. In twelfth-century romance, characters of less than noble lineage are somewhat rare, but they do exist. Occasionally, writers of romance take care to provide a short description of them that often includes references to their clothes. One such case occurs in *Yvain* when Calogrenant tells of meeting a hideous "vilain" during his travels. In addition to his grisly physical features, the hunchback is dressed very oddly: "vestuz de robe si estrange / qu'il n'i avoit ne lin ne lange, / einz ot a son col atachiez / deus cuirs de novel escorchiez, / ou de deus tors ou de deus bués" (dressed in an outfit so strange that it was made of neither wool or linen, but he wore, attached to his neck, two newly skinned hides from either two bulls or two cows) (vss. 307–11). The "barbaric" image that Chrétien gives his audience of this less than noble character contrasts greatly with his descriptions of his noble characters and their dress.

Et por voir si estoient il.
 Molt par sont bel et de lor aage,
 Gent et bien fet, de lonc corsage;
 Et les robes que il vestoient
 D'un drap et d'une taille estoient,
 D'un sanblant et d'une color.

(vss. 316–23)

[They did not doubt that they were all sons of counts and kings, and in truth they were. They were very handsome and in their prime, noble, well built and tall; and the clothes they wore were of the same cloth and size, the same aspect and color.]

Not only does the court easily recognize the worth of the young men immediately upon seeing them, understanding that they are sons of kings or counts and that they are young and strong, but it also understands that they themselves are all as “cut from the same cloth,” as are their clothes. These young men have the appearance of nobility and the attributes to match. This particular instance demonstrates to what extent clothing is linked to status and social identity in this period.

Likewise, in *Amadas et Ydoine*, the young man who passes by to bring news of the tournament is well-dressed, and as a result the news that he bears has greater authority than it would were he dressed less well.¹⁷ He is first described as simply “mult bien atourné” (very well attired) (vs. 4051), but then:

Si tost com Amadas le voit,
 A son atour bien aperçoit
 Et as letres qu'il voit porter
 Qu'il est de court et a l'aler.

(vss. 4059–62)

[As soon as Amadas saw him, and saw how he was dressed, as well as the letters he carried, he knew he was of the court and going there, too.]

17. Wolf-Bonvin devotes a chapter of her *Textus* to the discussion and analysis of the poet's use of clothing in *Amadas et Ydoine* (227–95), but for my purposes, the example cited clearly demonstrates a common feature of romance with regard to identification of character through clothes.

Once Amadas addresses the page, who looks at the one speaking to him, the page, in turn, realizes that the former is not a “borjois” but a knight. The text specifically states that it is upon seeing Amadas that the page realizes with whom he is speaking. The two recognize each other’s status by their clothing.

While the quality of one’s clothing in the twelfth century made it possible to identify a person’s social class, it is also instrumental in the expression of individual identity. Quentin Bell points out that clothing is an important part of a person’s identity, “as though the fabric were indeed a natural extension of the body, or even the soul” (19). Anne Hollander posits that a garment’s main function is “to contribute to the making of a self-conscious individual image” (xiv). Burns points to the “sartorial body,” which emerges from a conception of “clothes as an active force in generating social bodies” (*Courtly* 12). Individuality is a new phenomenon for the twelfth century, just beginning to manifest itself, and as Michel Pastoureau, in his *Figures et couleurs*, argues, “Le douzième siècle est le siècle de l’émergence de l’identité” (54).¹⁸ Furthermore, romance is the literary genre in medieval France that first sees the rise of the individual.¹⁹ Marc Bloch asserts that “la nouvelle littérature tendait à réintégrer l’individuel et invitait les auditeurs à méditer sur leur moi” (1: 169). The expression of individual identity also manifests in vestimentary ways: characters are often recognized as individuals on the basis of their clothing. Conversely, characters who wear unfamiliar clothing often go unrecognized.²⁰ Moreover, characters who are nude or not

18. R. W. Southern, writing about the changing values in the monasteries in the twelfth century, asserts that the period saw the rise of “a new emphasis on personal experience, an appeal to the individual conscience, a delving into the roots of the inner life” (228).

19. David Staines, in his introduction to his translation of Chrétien’s romances, makes the following assertion: “Traditionally, the epic and chronicle depict a nation; their characters are the embodiment of national destiny; their ultimate concern is the nation itself. By contrast, the romance depicts the individual. . . . The romances of Chrétien distance the individuals from their society, allow them their own identities, and examine their understanding of both themselves and their world.” Staines is writing specifically about Chrétien, and whereas Chrétien’s depiction of his characters may very well be exemplary with regard to their expressed individuality, Chrétien’s contemporaries certainly created and articulated individualized characters. Indeed, Robert W. Hanning sees the emergence of the concept of the individual in the twelfth century as a major driving force behind the literary production of the day and asserts that the chivalric romance “offered a literary form in which to work out the implications of individuality” (3).

20. In fact, in romance, disguise virtually always works, demonstrating once again to what extent the vestimentary code places a premium on the perfect conflation of substance and appearance.

dressed in their normal attire defy recognition altogether.²¹ The writers of twelfth-century romance represent the vestimentary code as immutable in a very peculiar way. Because their imagined society makes a complete and direct association between appearance and being, a character's use of disguise is foolproof in the romances. So dependent is the society upon clothing signifiers to establish identity, and so absolute its identifying power, that disguise always works. It never seems to occur to the characters deceived by disguise that this kind of manipulation of signifiers is even possible. Significantly, therefore, the omnipotence of the vestimentary code is most clearly visible through the subversion of it.

Thus far, my discussion has centered primarily upon the capacity of clothing to reveal something about the wearer, but its tremendous power to conceal is equally remarkable. What is fascinating about the signifying system in twelfth-century romance is that concealment by clothing is just as firmly based upon knowledge of the code as is reading clothing for revelation. It is explicitly because the community knows the code that individual members can understand and reproduce it. In other words, clothes have meaning that everyone in society is capable of deciphering because the entire group is in agreement on what that meaning is. This correspondence, however, is threatened by the possibility of disguise, which is the conscious and intentional manipulation of the code in order to subvert it. In the fictive universe of romance, characters who can reconfigure the code in this way have a clear advantage over their fellow characters. The fact of disguise, while in every way a *real* possibility, always seems to take the other characters completely by surprise, as if they cannot bring themselves to admit the potential of clothing to conceal. For the vast majority of characters, it is inconceivable that someone's appearance does not reflect reality. This denial of possibility once again gives evidence of the prevailing fear among the aristocracy of the disruption of the code, whether vestimentary or otherwise.

In romance, characters are clearly able to disguise themselves by wearing clothes that do not associate them with their normal identities. For example, when, in Bérout, Tristan puts on the clothing of a leper, the other

21. In Chrétien's *Chevalier au lion*, maidens have a difficult time recognizing Yvain, because he is nude and therefore not dressed in the manner in which they are accustomed to seeing him. The text asserts that were he dressed as he normally was, the ladies would recognize him quickly: "mes molt le regarda einçois / que rien nule sor lui veïst / qui reconuistre li feïst; / si l'avoit ele tant veü / que tost l'eüst reconeü / se il fust de si riche ator / com il avoit esté maint jor" (But she looked at him long and hard before she saw on his body any indication that would allow her to recognize him. She had in fact so often seen him that she would have recognized him quickly if he had been dressed as magnificently as he had been many days) (vss. 2890–96).

characters, except those who previously knew what he was intending to do, do not recognize him. Bérout describes his costume:

Tristran, li suens amis, ne fine,
 Vestu se fu de mainte guise;
 Il fu en legne, sanz chemise;
 De let burel furent les cotes
 Et a quarreaus furent ses botes.
 Une chape de burel lee
 Out fait tailler, tote enfumee.
 Affublez se fu forment bien,
 Malade senble plus que rien;
 Et nequeden si ot s'espee
 Entor ses flans estroit noee.

(vss. 3566–76)

[Tristan, her beloved friend, was not idle, but made himself a good disguise; it was in wool, without a *chemise*, his *cote* of ugly burel (brown coarse cloth) and his boots were made from patches.²² A tattered rank cloak (*chape*) of ugly burel he had made. His disguise was marvelous, and he looked more diseased than anything; nonetheless, he also had his sword tightly girded around his waist.]

Tristan dresses himself in the poorest of attire, and he appears to be truly ill. Throughout the day, he begs the people who know him, including his uncle, to give him their clothing. Not only does he appear before them, but he also has lengthy verbal exchange with them. Yet not a single one of them recognizes him, and no one even seems to suspect, despite Yseut's oath that only the leper and her husband have ever been "entre [s]es cuisses" (vs. 4203), that the leper could possibly be Tristan in disguise. Rather, they accept his identity as it is presented sartorially. Later, during the joust that precedes the oath, Tristan comes disguised to participate:

Cote, sele, destrier et targe
 Out couvert d'une noire sarge,

22. This image of Tristan, not only dressed in extremely rough and poor attire, but also especially without the benefit of a *chemise*, the undergarment that could have offered a bit of barrier between his skin and the cheap wool, provokes pity, yet serves also to show us to what lengths Yseut's lover will go to please her.

Son vis out covert d'un noir voil.
 Tot out covert et chief et poil.
 A sa lance ot l'enseigne mise
 Que la bele li ot tramise.

(vss. 3999–4004)

[He had covered his *cote*, saddle, warhorse, and shield with black serge, his face concealed with a black veil. He had completely covered his head and hair. On his lance he had attached the insignia that his lady had sent him.]

The black serge covers Tristan's identity so well that Girlet takes him to be the bewitched Black Knight of the Mountain, and as a result, no one will fight him (vs. 4016). In these cases, Tristan manipulates the code—he does not in any way *change* it—but transgresses it. He uses the vast normative and symbolic capital of the vestimentary code already in place in society perhaps in an unorthodox way, but his use does not alter either its normative or its symbolic power. He simply uses it to his own ends.

Like Tristan, other characters use the concealing potential of clothing for their own strategic purposes. In *Cligés*, Alexandre devises a plan to gain access to the castle of the traitorous Count Angrés. He and his men will don the armor of the count's fallen men to enter the castle without resistance and then to take revenge by capturing or killing those inside. The plan works marvelously:

Les escuz as morz vont seisir
 Si se metent an tel ator.
 Et as desfances de la tor
 Les genz del chastel monté furent,
 Et les escuz bien reconurent,
 Et cuident que de lor gent soient,
 Car de l'aguet ne s'apansoient,
 Qui desoz les escuz se ceuvre.
 Et li portiers les portes oevre,
 Si les a dedanz reçeüz.
 De c'est gabez et deçeüz,
 Car de rien ne les areisone,
 Ne uns de cez mot ne li sone.

(vss. 1830–42)

[They (the Greeks) will take the shields of the dead and put on their equipment. The people of the castle had gone up into the donjons of the castle, and they easily recognized the shields, believing them to be of their own men, for they did not foresee the trap that the shields hid behind them. And the porter opened the doors and let them enter. He is taken in by their ruse for he does not address a word to them and none of them speaks a word to him.]

Here again, there is never any questioning of appearances by the other characters; they assume the absolute impenetrability of the code. Because they recognize the armor, the knights inside believe they know the identity of the wearers.²³

The cases cited above are very representative of the effectiveness of disguise in twelfth-century romance. The authors create imagined societies in which the vestimentary code is absolute for the vast majority of characters. Only a select few of the characters have access to the possibility of manipulating the clothing signifiers that make up the system. These characters tend to be the protagonists of the romance and the characters whose point of view the author most often assumes. The author thus sets his protagonists apart from the rest of society and invites the audience into this exclusive group. Certainly, this position of exclusivity appeals to the members of the audience and makes them more sympathetic toward the protagonists and narrator. However, the author's use of disguise as a means to subvert the vestimentary code is completely obvious and explicit in these cases.

Progressive Manipulation of the Code

In other instances, there is a less blatant but still discernible manipulation of the a code, at three distinct levels of manipulation: duplication of the code but with new conventions, contextual or community changes that result in the necessity to interpret rather than simply read signifiers, and the absence of a code. The duplication of the code with changed conventions means that members of a particular linguistic community use different signifiers than

23. Armor, as I will discuss in more detail later, is ideally suited for the concealment of identity, and this material property is exploited for purposes of disguise throughout the period that armor was worn and in all the literary genres of the period. What is interesting for this study is the fact that, except on rare occasions like the one discussed, none of the characters acknowledge this capacity. See also Lacy, "On Armor and Identity."

those normally used to communicate the same meaning.²⁴ An example of this phenomenon would be if two or more teenagers began to use the word *bad* to mean “good.” They might even invent a new word that has the same meaning as an existing word in their language. The process of signification is the same, but they have substituted one convention for another, one signifier for another. Alteration of the signification process involves changes that occur at levels besides that of the signifier. These changes may take place at the level of the linguistic community or of the context. In this case, the meaning of a signifier is dependent upon with whom a speaker is conversing or in what environment the conversation is taking place. This first type of alteration to the signifying process is at the base of the insignia of such entities as secret societies; for example, an article of clothing or a piece of jewelry that has no meaning for the society at large will have a very specific meaning to a group within that society. Context-dependent signification occurs when signifiers have multiple meanings that vary according to the context in which they are used.²⁵ The meaning of a white cotton-blend overgarment changes according to the setting in which it is worn: it means “chef” in a restaurant, “doctor” in a hospital, “pharmacist” in a drugstore, and so on. Finally, the manipulations of a code can become so extensive, so overwhelming to that code, that it transcends itself to become a signifying system that, in Jonathan Culler’s words, “can produce meaning instead of merely refer to meanings that already exist” (20). In this kind of system, the meaning of a signifier is understandable only through an interpretive process that may vary from one situation to another.²⁶ It calls for more than the reading of symbols and more than the reading of signs in a specific context or community: it calls for the capacity to create meaning. In vestimentary terms, we may think of this system as parallel to a personal style in dress or, on a larger scale, the couturier’s creation before it has become the fashion and therefore codified.

My first discussion of code manipulation centers upon the duplication of the code with different conventions, and as noted above, this sort of alteration represents the first position on the continuum of progressive manipulation. Instances in which characters duplicate the form of the existing socially

24. I am borrowing the term “linguistic community” from the field of linguistics. Dubois et al. define the term in the following way: “Un groupe d’êtres humains utilisant la même langue ou le même dialecte à un moment donné et pouvant communiquer entre eux. . . . Elle se subdivise en de nombreuses autres communautés linguistiques inférieures. Tout individu appartenant à la communauté peut évidemment appartenir en même temps à plusieurs groupements linguistiques.” (96)

25. The discussion of context-based signifiers will continue in Chapter 4.

26. This dependence of the sign upon the interpretive process is underlined by Peirce, who writes: “The whole purpose of a sign is that it shall be interpreted in another sign, and its whole purport lies in the special character which it imparts to that interpretation” (247).

accepted vestimentary code and create new conventions tend to involve a recognition device. In both major French accounts of the Tristan legend of the twelfth century, those by Bérout and by Thomas, Yseut gives Tristan a ring so that she can positively identify him or his messenger (Bérout vss. 2707–32, Thomas vss. 2454–63); examining each of these instances in turn will illustrate code manipulation by duplication with new conventions. The use of a ring in these two romances to indicate and mark identity is formally similar to common practices of the day by which holders of an ecclesiastical or legal office wore an emblem of their position so that everyone could recognize their social role.²⁷ The vestimentary item is invested with powerful and unequivocal symbolism that extends throughout society. In Tristan and Yseut's case, the ring has little or no meaning, certainly no precise meaning, for society: it is a private symbol. The process by which the ring has meaning, however, is an exact duplication of the process by which signifiers take on meaning for a society. For both, a community agrees upon the referent and its meaning. Tristan and Yseut's ring represents a language that only the two of them speak. They maintain the code but change its conventions.

In Thomas's account, the ailing Tristan sends Kaherdin, disguised as a cloth merchant, to speak with Yseut. They know that if he does not disguise himself, he will not be allowed to speak with her. His disguise works, preventing anyone from recognizing him. Moreover, he gains an audience with the queen by insisting that she would certainly not want to miss out on the fine cloth that he has to show her. It is significant that he takes the disguise of a cloth merchant, for this costume makes it perfectly clear that Kaherdin, working on Tristan's behalf, has a special ability to manipulate cloth for his own means. In this instance, Kaherdin peddles cloth in three ways. First, he pretends to make his living from its trade; second, he uses the cloth of his disguise to conceal his identity and enter the city forbidden to him and to Tristan; and, last, he employs it as a ruse to speak with the sequestered Yseut. In this scene Kaherdin is the ultimate manifestation of the play in the system. As a merchant, he is the most potent agent for change; as a man who handles cloth, he is the provider of the most obvious means to alter appearance; and as a disguised man, he has used the vestimentary code and subverted it. Kaherdin's disguise is so complete and effective that even Yseut does not at first recognize him. But Tristan has sent Kaherdin with

27. As mentioned in Chapter 1, I am using as broad a definition of clothing as possible, one that includes jewelry, armor, and any other items of adornment, since all these items figure as part of the vestimentary code of the day. Additionally and crucially for the current discussion, these vestimentary items are part and parcel of a character's identity.

the ring, the agreed-upon recognition device, and when he shows it to the queen, she immediately understands the situation. The ring has a powerful meaning, and it is a sign that requires further action. Upon seeing it, Yseut must reinterpret appearances, reevaluate the situation, and read beyond the normative and symbolic meaning of Kaherdin's disguise as a cloth merchant. Only when she performs this interpretation can she see his true identity and his purpose for being there. The ring's power is nonetheless a private one: no one outside the limited community of Tristan, Yseut, and Kaherdin is capable of deciphering its special meaning.

Whereas the type of duplication of the vestimentary code that I have been describing represents the first position on a continuum of movement away from an impenetrable code, the middle position, by which the code is altered by changes in either linguistic community or context, contains a greater number of possibilities. This increased flexibility exists because, rather than simply changing the conventions of the existing code to create a new one, alterations to the process of signification occur at the middle position. One such alteration is the changing of the community. As we have seen, a code exists when the members of a linguistic community agree upon meaning, that is, on the relationship between the referent and what it signifies. We saw that in both Tristan romances, both Tristan and Yseut agree upon the meaning of the ring. There are cases in which a vestimentary item allows recognition even though the wearer is not part of the community, and I will examine three examples that illustrate just this kind of signification process. One such instance occurs in *Milun*, one of Marie's *lais*.²⁸ The knight Milun conceives a son with a lady promised to another man, and when the child is born, his parents send him to be raised by a distant relative. Much later, when the boy has reached manhood, Milun goes out in search of him in the region where his relative lives. The two encounter each other on a battlefield, and Milun recognizes his son because of a ring he wears, a ring that Milun and the lady had sent with their infant son long ago. This ring has just as much meaning as Tristan and Yseut's ring, for it too occasions recognition, but in this case, it has meaning for only one of the two involved in the recognition episode. The son cannot participate in the interpretation of the ring as a sign of parentage; he may only be an observer. The code remains indecipherable to him because he is not included in the linguistic community that agreed upon its meaning.

28. See also Van Vleck on the use of textile in this *lai* (45–47).

The second instance of exclusive linguistic communities that I will examine occurs in the romance *Guillaume d'Angleterre*. King Guillaume's twin sons are parted from their father and mother as infants and are adopted by two merchants. Before their abduction, the king ripped out the sides of his coat in order to swaddle them. Although much later the two pieces of cloth will be the emblem by which the king definitively determines his sons' true identity, the adoptive fathers do not read these signifiers in this way. In fact, they mistakenly take them to be indicators of their adoptive sons' low birth. The twin sons also remain unaware both of their true origins and of the importance and significance of the pieces of cloth. Only Guillaume (and possibly his wife, although we are not explicitly told of her awareness) is capable of reading the pieces of cloth cut from his old coat as emblems of his lost sons' identities. The linguistic community in this case is quite possibly a single person, but this person is tremendously important, and his capacity to read the pieces of cloth as signifiers of the sons' true identity is crucial for the romance. He is the only character capable of carrying out the process of signification that occasions the process of identification for the sons.

Finally, *Erec et Enide* offers a particularly interesting example of alteration of the linguistic community with regard to clothing. In this particular case, the specialized linguistic community consists of Enide's family, Erec, and at least Guenevere, if not Arthur's entire court. During the passages in which Erec first meets Enide's family and in which Erec makes arrangements to marry Enide and provide for her family (vss. 387–546, 1310–94), both Erec and Enide's father are adamant that Enide continue to wear her ragged attire until the appropriate occasion arise and the worthy dresser arrive. The family and Erec are in complete agreement in this attitude. Moreover, they all interpret Enide's current clothing to mean the same things: Enide's personal worth demands that a truly extraordinary person dress her; the right person to dress her has not yet come along; and as of yet no one worthy of dressing her has offered. Once Erec brings Enide to Arthur's court, he finds the worthy Guenevere willing and able to dress Enide in nothing less than the queen's own new and exquisite *bliant* and mantle (vss. 1563–1652). Whereas Guenevere explicitly states to Erec that he has followed the right and proper course in bringing Enide in her ragged attire to court ("Molt avez bien fait: / droiz est que de mes robes ait" [You have done very well; it is right that she have one of my robes] [vss. 15763–64]) and then dresses her in a lively and elaborate scene, many people in Enide's town were baffled by first Enide's father's then Erec's

refusals to allow anyone to provide better clothes for the maiden.²⁹ Enide's cousin explains: "Molt grant honte / sera a vos, plus qu'a autrui, / se cist sires an mainne o lui / vostre niece si povremant / atornee de vestement'" ("Great shame will be yours, more than anyone else's, if this knight takes with him your niece so poorly dressed") (vss. 1344–48). These detractors misunderstand the attitude of Erec and Enide's father because they simply do not belong to the community of people who can attach the one correct meaning to Enide's attire. They attach an entirely different meaning to the garments: that it is disgraceful and dishonorable to take Enide to Arthur's court thus dressed when, in fact, according to the community in question, it is exactly the right path to pursue. This example clearly shows how a single vestimentary item in these romances may be read differently by different linguistic communities, and it demonstrates to what extent the writers of romance are calling into question the larger, monolithic vestimentary code of their society. Multiple possible meanings of a single vestimentary signifier introduce ambiguity into the code, thereby defying the absolutism and constraints of the code that the audience of romance would have preferred to remain constant and unproblematic.

The last position within code manipulation is the absence or transcendence of the code. To illustrate this extreme position I will draw upon a remarkable example of code subversion from Chrétien's *Chevalier de la charrete*, or *Lancelot*, that involves Lancelot's armor, the tournament at Nouaz.³⁰ A short discussion of armor and its identificatory power will be useful. With regard to this vestimentary code, armor is a special case, both in terms of its material type and with regard to its capacity for symbolism. While the quality of the clothing that a knight wears may identify him as having that particular social role and rank, the heraldic design depicted on his armor can identify him individually.³¹ At the same time that the members of society

29. The author spends close to a hundred lines describing the dressing scene in which Guenevere not only gives Enide one of her own magnificent gowns and beautiful mantles, but also oversees the "making" of the new Enide (vss. 1567–1652). Guenevere sees to it that silk ribbons and gold clasps adorn the gown and mantle and then urges Enide to cast away her old ensemble. Enide's transformation from impoverished maiden into a proper lady of the court, which directly precedes her marriage to Erec, is thus made material in the changing of her clothes.

30. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner has thoroughly and beautifully analyzed this complex and important scene, and my discussion of it owes a great deal to her expert reading of it in *Shaping Romance* (61–77).

31. Lacy points to an unusual scene in romance: in the Gauvain section of *Perceval*, Arthur's nephew is believed by onlookers to be not a knight, but a merchant, because he has two shields ("On Armor" 368). This bizarre reading by the others suggests that it is impossible to identify properly when the code is violated, or in Lacy's terms, when identification is at odds with identity.

were being mobilized to identify with certain factions and groups within the society, on the battlefield, the knights had every reason to keep their individual identities clearly visible (Pastoureau, *Armorial* 54). Ideally, knights in battle *need* to distinguish among themselves, although sometimes they cannot; they *need* to identify their enemies and allies in order to fight the right opponents. Pastoureau points to innovations in the armor of the twelfth century as the driving force behind the development of heraldry (55). With the development of the nosepiece, which covered a good part of the face, recognition by normal means became impossible, and to compensate for this effect, the knights began to paint emblems upon their shields.³² The armor of knights communicates their social role and status, but the emblems on their shields are nothing less than markers of individual identity.

The romances of the twelfth century are replete with references to heraldry. The reliance of knights upon heraldic designs to identify one another is clearly portrayed in Chrétien's *Lancelot*, when several knights who are no longer participating in the tournament at Nouaz identify the knights on the field for the queen and her ladies:³³

Antr'ax d'ient: "Veez vos or
celui a cele bande d'or?
par mi cel escu de bernic?
C'est Gouvernauz de Roberdic.
Et veez vos celui après
qui an son escu pres a pres
a mise une aigle et un dragon?
C'est li filz le roi d'Arragon
qui venuz est an ceste terre
por pris et por encor conquerre.

(vss. 5773–82)

32. "Nous connaissons la cause principale [de l'apparition des armoiries en Europe occidentale]: le développement du haubert et du casque rendant peu à peu les combattants méconnaissables, ceux-ci prennent l'habitude de faire peindre sur la grande surface de leur bouclier des figures servant à se reconnaître au coeur de la mêlée; on peut parler d'armoiries à partir du moment où le même personnage fait constamment usage de la même figure" (Pastoureau, *Armorial* 89).

33. Krueger has analyzed the tournament scene in terms of a double subversion of feminine desire under the guise of Guenevere's complete dominance over Lancelot and his performance on the battlefield. First, when the seneschal's wife frees Lancelot from his prison on condition that he return and give her all his love, it is a promise she knows he cannot keep. Second, the ladies of Nouaz are frustrated that none can marry the best knight, subverting entirely their original intention for holding the tournament (*Women Readers* 62–63).

[Among themselves they said: “Do you now see the one with gold band across a red shield? That’s Governal of Roberdic. And do you see the one after who has a shield on which he has placed an eagle and a dragon side by side? That’s the son of the king of Aragon who came to this country to win esteem and glory.]

This naming of knights by their coats of arms continues for another forty lines or so, providing ample evidence of how important emblems on armor are for recognition. Heraldry is a symbolic system that resolves the identity ambiguity of armor that conceals the face of the wearer, but it is not an immutable system. Armor, even emblazoned, often hides identity rather than revealing it. Knights are, in fact, one of the more problematic entities from the standpoint both of society and of the vestimentary system. Their armor lends itself extremely well and quite often to disguise, whether intentional or not, and to manipulation. For society, knights are perhaps the most visible vestige of ancestral glory, that of the *bellatores*, and are the very emblem of it. Yet they also embody the paradoxes of the vestimentary code. The very attire that makes them knights has all the potential to undermine its absolute meaning, its identificatory power. Armor is thus the internal flaw of the code, in that it invites disguise and therefore ambiguity. The symbolism of a coat of arms can never be absolute, even though the nobility is most invested in its absolutism.

The naming scene cited above is also important for the narrative because the knights’ ability to name the others is compromised by the appearance of Lancelot, who is incognito.³⁴ This most accomplished of knights arrives to participate in the tournament wearing borrowed armor that none of the others is capable of recognizing.³⁵ Lancelot’s winning performance on the field baffles the company of knights, for they cannot imagine who this knight in unfamiliar armor might be. The queen, on the other hand, looks beyond Lancelot’s outer trappings and sees her knight through his deeds rather than through his clothing. As Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner has remarked, the queen “acts first, in order to reveal Lancelot’s identity by concealing it from

34. Bruckner remarks that the tournament itself is not recounted to us directly (except for forty-two verses) but rather through the eyes of observers: “Rather than offer us direct description of fighting, the narrator multiplies the spectacle through the varying and contradictory perspectives of heralds, damsels, Queen, and knights, combatants and non-combatants (including Gauvain) who witness and evaluate what they see. The enumeration of and description of the best knights’ shields, which imitates the second day of the tournament, exemplifies this tendency to see the tournament as an object of contemplation” (*Shaping* 63).

35. The herald, of course, has recognized Lancelot by having seen the knight in his miserable lodging the night before, so without his armor.

everyone else” (*Shaping* 74). In fact, the queen verifies his identity through instructions to do his worst, then his best, which is exactly what determines his actions on the battlefield. Bruckner suggests even that the queen “recognizes Lancelot through a slight delay before a brilliant performance—the pattern typical of Lancelot and Lancelot alone throughout the romance—her immediate recognition is nevertheless subject to caution,” since she has, after all, been subject to the false signs of his death earlier in the romance (*Shaping* 76). She devises her test to confirm his identity whose “form itself indicates how well the Queen has read Lancelot’s character (and the previous events of the romance)” (76). Guenevere has made the heraldic code obsolete through her skillful imagining and arrives at a new way of discerning identity, one that is ambiguous: at once verbal (through the intermediary of the damsel who understands nothing of what she is communicating) and silent (between the two lovers) and behavioral, involving her perception of his patterned actions and his obedience through his acts to her requests.

Chrétien has very clearly set forth the heraldic signifying system; with the voice of his characters he demonstrates how heraldic recognition works. However, the poet simultaneously subverts the system as he develops it. Lancelot, known by every person present at the tournament, knowable to everyone by his deeds, remains unknown to all but one observer. Chrétien showcases the identificatory power of clothing, and here, armor, only then to show its breaking point. The heraldic system is a strictly symbolic system, and it breaks down with Lancelot’s introduction of ambiguity into it. Lancelot’s presence requires more interpretation than simply looking to his armor to identify him. His identity is discernible only when other information is taken into consideration. The queen recognizes him because she has *interpreted* his identity rather than simply read it. In this case, Chrétien clearly demonstrates his capacity to manipulate a symbolic code, the heraldic code, until it transcends its limits and becomes a system in which meaning is created.

To posit that this play, this capacity to move beyond the limits of the code, is unique to the representational universe would be to make a false claim. It is precisely because this slippage exists in the system used by the society that the writers of romance in the twelfth century could exploit it so fully in their works. Codes are problematic in nature for the very reason that the meaning of their signifiers is an invention. Jonathan Culler explains the paradoxical nature of semiotic systems:

The very energy employed in the proliferation and naturalization of signs—the desire to make everything signify and yet to make

all those meanings inherent and intrinsic—finally undermines the meaning accorded to objects. These two processes which seek in opposite ways to affirm meaning, by creating and naturalizing it, contribute to what becomes, in effect, a self-contained activity. Absorbing and undermining the two contributory forces, the process of signification becomes an autonomous play of meaning. (40)

The writers of romance inscribe this play into their literary works because it is real, because it is true. The nobles, cling as they might to the code and the notions from which the code derives, cannot deny that there is play in the system. However, the romances provide them with a safe environment in which to explore the intrinsic contradictions in the system. In each romance, the noble heroes and heroines triumph, despite the introduction of ambiguity, ambivalence, and arbitrariness by the writers. The romances have challenged the clothing conventions to which the nobles are accustomed and then reassured the nobles that even with widespread manipulation of the vestimentary code by others, they still retain their place at the top of society. Additionally, the writers have produced rich works of high artistic merit, evidenced by their transcendence of both the vestimentary code and the rigid convention of character elaboration, and they have still pleased their audience. Their use of clothing in such an inventive and creative way has been crucial to their accomplishment of the dual goal of challenging and pleasing. The writers have dressed their characters with their artistic goals in mind, and, indeed, the clothes have made them who they are.

