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Weaving Narrative

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CLOTHING ACTS AND THE MOVEMENT FROM CODE TO SIGNIFYING SYSTEM

CLOTHING ACTS ARE THOSE actions taken by characters to alter the appearance of themselves or others. Appearance was extremely important to the twelfth-century French nobility insofar as it provided the strongest and a very stable indicator of identity, both personal and social, both within society and in its literary expression.¹ Therefore, clothing acts are a seemingly natural place for writers to inscribe ambiguity, ambivalence, or arbitrariness into their texts, since these acts specifically and inherently involve the modification of appearance. That a character chooses to make alterations to his, her, or another's appearance, and thus to that person's social and personal identity, attests to the existence of the very possibility of such changes. Varying one's or another's appearance, then, becomes a mechanism of transformation in a much larger sense. The fact that romance so often portrays characters in the process of changing clothes confirms both the capacity for evolution of these characters and the openness of the representational system to the introduction of more fluidity. In much the same way that the characters become, in changing clothes, manipulators of appearance, writers of romance become experts in manipulation of the vestimentary code.

This transformation may be viewed as occurring in a progressive fashion, although I do not mean to suggest that this progression was absolute in any sense. In fact, adherence to the code occurs throughout the romances of the period; however, it does not prohibit the writers from using it in different ways and for different purposes. Their manipulation of convention is apparent alongside their more standard use of it. Writers use the code as a resource to portray features of their characters quickly and to provide important details for the plot efficiently; it serves them as a sort of shorthand.

1. This situation is not unique to twelfth-century society, the near absolutism of the concordance of appearance to identity is beginning to wane. In the following centuries, clothing would still be relied upon to make indications about social and class identity, but the fixity of such a system could no longer be taken for granted.

However, romances boast many examples of considerable adjustments to the code, some so substantial that the code is forced into transforming into a true signifying system capable of generating new meanings rather than simply reiterating previously established ones.² This chapter focuses upon modifications to convention that involve alterations to the contexts in which the clothing signifiers occur.

Clothing acts are especially interesting for tracking code manipulation, first, because these acts already invite, if not force, a questioning of the absolute and motivated meaning of the signifier and, second, because they have a particular relation to narrative context: they are acts rather than descriptions. As such, they introduce the clothing signifier into the plot of the romance. Clothing becomes performative rather than simply descriptive, and, accordingly, the vestimentary code is pushed into the action as well. Moreover, because clothing acts are actions taken by characters, they may be considered in terms of the character's motivation. Often, a character's purpose for performing an act involving clothing is not realized. In such cases, we must look further and consider the act in different contexts to grasp its meaning for the narrative.

Gifts of Clothing

In twelfth-century France, gifts, whether of clothing or not, solidified and reified social ties and therefore performed a crucial function. Both in the society at large and in its literary expression, gifts remained symbolic acts, motivated by society's need for internal organization and a system of interrelations among social classes. Clearly, gifts are the currency of the gift economy to which the nobility clung during this period. Lester K. Little explains that "in a gift economy, goods and services are exchanged without having specific, calculated values assigned to them. Prestige, power, honor, and wealth are all expressed in the spontaneous giving of gifts; and more than just expressed: these attributes are attained and maintained through largess" (4). So important was this form of structuration to twelfth-century French society that the entrepreneurs of the merchant class, once they met

2. This definition of a signifying system—as a system “which can produce meaning instead of merely refer to meanings that already exist”—comes from Culler and his discussion of the limits of a code (20). This distinction is basic to the one that I make throughout this study between the vestimentary code and the clothing signifying system. See also my discussion in Chapter 1.

with a certain degree of affluence, themselves began to emulate the nobility's penchant for largess (8). It is therefore not surprising that in literature, gifts would continue to be important for the establishment of social ties. The stakes seem to be too great to risk society's well-being by questioning or problematizing the gift economy too rigorously. Accordingly, throughout the romances, the act of giving clothing for the most part upholds the conventions of the vestimentary code. In fact, the movement charted in Chapter 2 from a symbolic language toward a system of more freely interpretable signs is largely, although not completely, absent with regard to the gift of clothing. Nonetheless, a discussion of clothing gifts is useful in that it provides striking evidence that writers of twelfth-century romance extensively used the standard vestimentary paradigm alongside their manipulation or subversion of it.

There are numerous examples of clothing gifts in twelfth-century verse romance that demonstrate aristocratic largess.³ In *Cligés*, when Alexandre sets off from Greece to prove himself in the Arthurian court, he asks his father for a number of supplies, but, in particular, he asks for "dras de soie" so that he may show his largess by richly providing for his retinue (vss. 140–45). In honor of Erec's wedding, Arthur gives gifts of clothing to the minstrels who regaled the court (*Erec* vss. 2055–64). In *Lanval*, once his encounter with the mystical lady has changed the hero's fortune for the better, he shares his wealth, bestowing gifts of clothes upon jongleurs (vs. 211). Jaufré gives out gifts of luxurious clothes upon his return as lord to Brunissen's land (*Jaufré* vss. 10800–10821). Finally, upon his father's death, Erec distributes clothes to the poor and to priests to honor the solemn occasion (*Erec* vss. 6474–84). All of these clothing gifts establish or reaffirm social ties among groups of people, particularly between lord and vassal or between social superior and inferior. The gifts highlight the importance of sharing wealth on state occasions or in prosperous times. They also reflect the social practices of bestowing gifts during periods of changing status, as in the cases of Alexandre, Erec, and Jaufré, as well as the immediate redistribution of wealth after acquisition, as in the case of Lanval.

The dubbing of a knight provides a highly codified occasion of clothing gifts, especially but not limited to the gift of armor. Guigemar receives armor from the king he serves once he is of age (*Guigemar* vss. 43–50), and Amadas has his father beg the duke to make him a knight and give him armor (*Amadas* vss. 1312–28). Arthur dubs Jaufré and gives him a warhorse

3. A detailed discussion of the social function of largess appears in Chapter 2.

and a suit of armor (*Jaufre* vss. 634–48). These gifts of armor not only solidify the bonds between lord and knight; they also provide the knight with the equipment necessary to perform his new role. Thus, the gift of armor upon dubbing has more than interpersonal value: it is a transformational device for the recipient. A knight is defined and identified by his armor. Therefore, this gift has far more than the power to bind one man to another in the context of a gift economy: it actually transforms a regular man into a knight, bestowing status, rank, and role upon another human being. Not only does a lord give the new knight a suit of armor, but he also provides him rich clothing items. Whereas these articles of clothing do not have the same value as armor in terms of establishing a knight in his new social role, they facilitate his ability to perform the other duties of his new status—his appearance at court. One way in which romance often differs from epic is in its placing an equal emphasis upon a knight’s behavior at court and upon his behavior on the battlefield.⁴ The fact that romance would depict gifts of fine, courtly clothing alongside gifts of armor is therefore perfectly in keeping with the new values of the romance genre. In the universe of the courtly romance, the one gift indeed necessitates the other.

Piponnier and Mane remark that a common clothing gift at dubbing might be a scarlet mantle (33), but there are references to other items as well. For example, in honor of Erec’s wedding, Arthur dubs one hundred knights and gives each of them a “robe vaire / de riche paisle d’Alexandre, / chascuns tel com il la volt prandre / a son vouloir, a sa devise” (an outfit in vair and rich Alexandrian silk, each one taking the one he wants, according to his desire and taste) (*Erec* vss. 1966–69). And later, at Erec’s coronation, Arthur dubs more than four hundred knights, giving them, the texts states, the clothes necessary to improve their appearance at court:

Ot adobez li rois Artus
 .IIII. cenz chevaliers et plus,
 toz filz de contes et de rois;
 chevax dona a chascun trois
 et robes a chascun trois peire,
 por ce que sa corz mialz apeire.

4. By this I do not mean to suggest that no behavior in court is depicted in epic, nor do I mean to suggest that the line between epic and romance conventions is so clearly drawn as to be unproblematic. Quite the contrary, the lines do often blur, but I speak here of a general tendency in romance to value a knight’s behavior at court, or in courtly situations with the opposite sex, to a similar extent that it values his accomplishments of feats on the battlefield or on adventures.

Molt fu li rois puissanz et larges:
 ne dona pas mantiax de sarges,
 ne de conins ne de brunetes,
 mes de samiz et d'erminetes,
 de veir antier et de diäpres,
 listez d'orfois roides et aspres.

(vss. 6599–6610; emphasis mine)

[King Arthur had dubbed four hundred knights and more, all sons of counts and kings: he gave to each three horses and three (pairs of) robes, so that his court would look better. The king was very powerful and generous: he did not give mantles of serge, nor of rabbit, nor of dark brown wool, but of samite and ermine, and whole vair and *diaspre*, bordered with stiff and rough orphrey.]

The text goes on to explain how much more generous Arthur's offerings at this event are than those of Alexander or Caesar (vss. 6612–23). This favorable comparison with great rulers of history asserts Arthur's superiority over them, for, as we have seen, largess is the mark of a great ruler. There is nonetheless a great benefit to Arthur himself as he bestows such luxurious gifts to the new knights of his court: his becomes the most resplendent court in memory. His free and expansive expression of his largess augments the renown of his court and establishes him as the greatest ruler ever to live. These examples of Arthur's generosity demonstrate very clearly that largess is a mutually beneficial exchange by which the knight enjoys material gain while the lord garners intangible but nonetheless considerable return.

There are other equally compelling examples of Arthur's reaping intangible benefit from his expression of largess. Toward the end of *Jaufre*, Arthur decides to replace the clothing that was destroyed during the episode in which the knights removed all their garments to cushion his fall at the beginning of the romance (vss. 10064–10110). His decision results from the queen's complaint to the enchanter knight that the latter could never make up for the harm his earlier actions have caused her. Arthur is attempting to make reparations even though he is not the cause of the harm; his responsibility stems, rather, from his perhaps too ardent desire for adventures (to which the enchanter claims to be responding) as well as the fact that the damage has occurred in his court. At any rate, his replacement of his court's clothing is lavish, going well beyond what was expected of him.

E aqui meseus li borzes
 An fait cargar tut demanes
 .v. carres trastoz de cendatz,
 E .v. de samitz orfresatz,
 E .x. dels millhors draps de grana
 Que crestian ni crestiana
 Anc en neguna terra vi,
 E .xx. clagueron n'atressi
 De vertz e de rics cislatons,
 E de palis ben fais e bons,
 E enaissi sun s'en intrat
 El palais, on an descargat.

(vss. 10079–90)

[And at once the townsmen filled the whole order with five carts full of *cendal*, and five carts of orphrey-embellished samite, and ten of the best scarlets that any Christian man or woman had ever seen in any land, and twenty more of green and rich *siglatons*, and well-made and good silks. And they came thus into the palace and unloaded it.]

We learn that there has never been at any court so much of these rich fabrics sewn into clothing; the narrator says that to describe it fully would become tedious (vss. 10097–10110). Clearly, Arthur is using the excuse of replacing the worn-out clothes (since it defies verisimilitude that his fall onto the pile of them could have destroyed them) to grandly demonstrate his largess. Moreover, he offers his gift to anyone, regardless of whether their clothes were used in the pile or not. This degree of generosity is indeed exemplary and extends into the realm of hyperbole.⁵ Only a king of Arthur's standing could either afford such largess or be expected to make gifts of this magnitude. And while ostensibly he is replacing clothing ruined in the process of saving him, his motivation is the restoration of peace and order in his court as well as its trust. His gift, then, does as much for his own benefit as for its recipients.

The preceding examples attest to the predominance of seigneurial largess within the literary expression of the period. Yet, as discussed above,

5. In fact this romance's propensity for hyperbole is well noted, and scholars have tended to view it as evidence of a satirical or parodical treatment of typical Arthurian themes and motifs. See Caroline Jewers's "The Name of the Ruse and the Round Table"; Veronica Fraser's "Humour and Satire in the Romance of *Jaufre*"; and Suzanne Fleishman's "*Jaufre* or Chivalry Askew."

these gifts certainly do not occur without repercussions: texts also relate the rewards of a character's largess. One example of this occurs in *Thèbes* when the people of Thebes grieve the loss of Ates and remember him primarily for his largess (vss. 6312–25). This example shows clearly that largess is an inherent and essential trait of a good leader, but it also makes clear that gifts are not forgotten or taken for granted. In fact, as Little notes, in a gift economy, “the act of giving is less free than the connotation of ‘giving’ suggests, because one gift obliges the recipient to make a counter-gift,” and furthermore, “the failure of a recipient to reciprocate properly can lead to the rupture of the social ties involved” (4). Reciprocation may, however, as Marcel Mauss informs us, take many forms other than a similar counter-gift (151): “De plus, ce qu’ils échangent, ce n’est pas exclusivement des biens et des richesses, des meubles et des immeubles, des choses utiles économiquement. Ce sont avant tout des politesses, des festins, des rites, des services militaires, des femmes, des enfants, des danses, des fêtes, des foires dont le marché n’est qu’un des moments et où la circulation des richesses n’est qu’un des termes d’un contrat beaucoup plus général et beaucoup plus permanent” (151).

The exchange of gifts, then, may be imagined in a more abstract way, rather than in uniquely material terms. For example, the lord who dubs a knight and gives him a gift of armor may expect his gift to be reciprocated by the knight's service and protection, that is, by the use of the armor. In the example from *Thèbes*, the outpouring of grief for Ates is a type of reciprocation for the many gifts that he has given over the years. In *Erec et Enide*, Erec's offer to dress his future in-laws richly (vss. 1324–36) is a particularly good example of the rewards of generosity. Enide's father allows Erec to wear his own beautiful armor to participate in the sparrowhawk episode, and the text emphasizes that the armor fits Erec extremely well (vss. 763–72). Erec repays Enide's father's generosity by the promise of fine clothing, thereby returning in kind but to a much greater extent the gift of armor. By having the expensive cloth sent from his own home, he is doing much more than simply reciprocating a gift: he is providing Enide's family the means to integrate seamlessly into his own.

In Chrétien's *Le Chevalier au lion*, or *Yvain*, there is a fascinating example of past largess inspiring a similar response: the recipients of Lunete's repeated and consistent gift-giving take pity upon her state of undress as she is being led to the stake. What distinguishes this example is that their pity, evoked in a similar way to his people's grief for Ates, mobilizes them into action, an action that constitutes the exact reciprocation of the clothing gifts she has so often given them. For her “crime” of having convinced

Laudine to marry Yvain, Lunete is being taken to be burned at the stake “trestoute nue en sa chemise” (completely nude in her *chemise*) (vs. 4316). However, the other ladies realize that Lunete has been too harshly judged, and they remember that she has provided them with beautiful clothes to wear: “Par son consoil nos revestoit / Ma dame de ses robes veires” (By her counsel, my lady gave us her vair robes to wear) (vss. 4360–61). Finally, they decide to send a set of clothes, including a mantle with which to cover herself (vss. 4368–73), effectively reducing her shame. Therefore, Lunete’s past generosity toward these ladies inspires in them the desire to offer help to Lunete when she needs it. Furthermore, they assist her by providing clothes to her in kind. In this last case, the reciprocal nature of feudal society is in clear evidence. Lunete, when in a position of some power, gives gifts of clothing to those less fortunate, but once her fortune changes, the former beneficiaries of her generosity assume the role of provider and clothe her.

Gifts of clothing are not always limited to the expression of a lord’s largess; sometimes they occur for other reasons and with other effects. Three categories of nonlargess gifts deserve brief mention here: restorative gifts, identificatory gifts, and love gifts. In all three of these classes, the act of giving clothing is reciprocated by a counter act of some sort and is thus similar in effect to gifts that characterize a lord’s largess. Further, there is certainly some overlap among these categories, including the category of largess. Restorative gifts of clothing are often the main mechanism by which a character’s former status or health is restored. For example, in *Amadas et Ydoine*, the innkeeper provides Amadas, who is recovering from love-induced madness, with everything he needs to resume his knightly activities. The text twice articulates the innkeeper’s provision. First, Ydoine tells him that his host “Li trouvera tout son desir, / Cevaus et dras a grant honor, / Armes, harnois et bel atour” (will find him all he desires, horses and honorable silks, arms, and fine equipment) (vss. 3888–90). A second list occurs about a hundred lines later, this time somewhat extended: “Robes li trouvera et dras / Fres et noviaus et vair et gris, / Et armes et cevas de pris / Et, se lui plaist, autre harnois” (He will find robes and fresh and new silk and vair and gris, and arms and prized horses, and if it pleases him, another harness) (vss. 4014–17). It is through these gifts, symbols of the care accorded to Amadas, that he is able to heal. The wife of Meleagant’s seneschal gives Lancelot her husband’s new red armor so that he may continue on his way and participate in the tournament, on the condition that he give her his love once he returns (*Lancelot* vss. 5495–5511). Each of them obtains something

in this exchange: the lady is promised Lancelot as lover, and Lancelot can anonymously demonstrate his prowess at the tourney. Once more, it is the woman's concern, symbolized in the gift of armor, that Lancelot is capable of attending the tournament. In *Erec et Enide*, King Evrain replaces Erec's worn armor when he encounters him in the woods (vss. 5627–45), and this replacement of Erec's armor by a king himself reflects the queen's replacing of Enide's worn dress earlier. In all these cases, the clothing gift is crucial for the rehabilitation of the affected knight and for his restoration to his former capacities.

Identificatory gifts are those by which a character's identity is either established or enhanced by a gift of clothing. Often this establishment of identity comes at a long interval from the giving, but the counter act is almost always the restoration of a lost person to a former interpersonal relationship. In *Fresne* the mother's wrapping her daughter in a beautiful and unique cloth (a piece of sumptuous silk brought back personally from Constantinople by the child's father) in addition to attaching a ring that reveals her daughter's nobility to a band around her arm, ensures that later in the text, upon seeing the cloth in the possession of the daughter, the mother will recognize her.⁶ In *Guigemar* the two lovers devise clothing markers by which to remain faithful to one another after they are separated. She ties a knot in the hem of his shirt that only she knows how to untie, while he places a belt around her that only he knows how to unfasten (vss. 557–75). Although the purpose of these devices is that the two may refuse to love anyone who cannot release them, the knot and the belt also provide a means for the lovers to recognize each other at the *lai's* end.⁷ In these cases, the gift of clothing unequivocally establishes the identity of the recipient in the eyes of the giver. Clothing becomes an important mark of identity, one that is even more potent than physical attributes inasmuch as it is equivalent to personal identity. In *Le Bel Inconnu* Guinglain spends the first half of the romance completely unaware of his own identity, the situation from which the romance derives its name. Blanches Mains reveals his identity to him, however, once he liberates the Desolate City. She moreover tells him that

6. Whalen, in his excellent study on memory in the *Lais*, highlights the scene of the passing along of the textile and ring and its textual repetition multiple times within the short *lai* as crucial for assuring the remembrance of past events, as well as the capacity of the mother to recognize her child at such a great temporal delay (84–86).

7. Bruckner has argued that “the process of recognition requires all the resources of sense perception, the special trials of magic objects, the faculties of reason and memory, and the crowning movement of the whole process—the transformation of action into discourse, *récit*” (*Shaping* 169).

his mother is the one who gave him his armor and sent him to be one of Arthur's knights: "Vostre mere vos adoba, / au roi Artus vos envoia" (Your mother dubbed you, sent you to King Arthur) (vss. 4973–74). Guinglain's mother, therefore, gave him the identity of a knight without revealing to him his real, personal identity. Through the utilization of his armor and his ambition to be one of Arthur's knights, though, Guinglain eventually arrives at the place where he can learn of his origins. His armor, then, leads him to his personal identity. The mother's act is, like the acts of Frêne's mother and those of the lovers in *Guigemar*, a device of delayed recognition that allows for long periods of time to pass before recognition occurs. In contrast to the other acts, however, that of Guinglain's mother is not answered with her own recognition of her son, but rather leads her son along the path that will take him toward self-knowledge.

Gifts of clothing are often markers of love. Ydoine gives Amadas tokens of her love: "Par drüerie li envoie / une enseigne de fine soie / bien ouvree d'oevre soutil / et une mance de cainsil / et une çainture a armer" (For affection, she sent him an insignia of fine silk, well and subtly worked and a linen sleeve and a belt to arm himself) (*Amadas* vss. 1355–59). While he travels, she sends him other clothing tokens that communicate her love for him and her devotion to him: "Aniaus, çaintures, guimples, mances / De cainsil ridees et blances" (rings, belts, wimples, sleeves of pleated white linen) (vss. 1467–68). In Marie's *Eliduc*, the king's daughter sends Eliduc her ring and her belt. This act not only demonstrates her love for him; she claims that it also grants him possession of her: "Por ceo li enveiat l'anel / et la ceinturè autresi / que de son cors l'aveit seisi" (She sent to him the ring and the belt as well because she had granted him possession of her body) (vss. 510–12). They function as a synecdoche for the lady, and her action ultimately precipitates the free expression of love between the two, prefiguring his later physical possession of her. Their mutual but unexpressed love is already torturing the two separately but remains hidden from each other. The lady's gift and her inquiring about it later bring the love into the open and allow the two to become lovers. This gift's effects are very similar to the effects of Guenevere's gift to Alexandre in *Cligés* (vss. 1141–82). The queen gives Alexandre a *chemise* into which Soredamors, Alexandre's unconfessed love, has sewn, in one seam, a golden thread, and in the other, one of her own golden-colored hairs. It is significant both that the queen's gift comes in the form of a vestimentary object, additionally so because Soredamors made the *chemise* herself, and that Alexandre's beloved is physically present in the gift through the hair sewn in its seam. Soredamors's hair also functions here

as a material substitution for her.⁸ Hair is not simply an adorning element (hair being the part of the body that we most readily may alter for aesthetic purposes): it is a tiny physical piece of Soredamors herself. The poet describes the hair as being more beautiful, and thus more valuable, than the gold strand that is sewn into the other seam of the *chemise* (vs. 1548–50). Yet the burgeoning love between Alexandre and Soredamors shows most clearly the hair's true worth. The queen uses the *chemise* with its hair as a means to coax the two would-be lovers into a confession of their mutual love, despite their best attempts to hide it from the world as well as from each other. Finally, clothing gifts made to bring about the love of a character are not always successful. In *Guigemar Mériaduc*, although he takes good care of the lady he imprisons by dressing her well, never receives the love he desires from her (vss. 714–18). The lady's refusal to return his affections, of course, results from the fact that she loves Guigemar, but Mériaduc is also attempting to force her love. His attitude toward her is clear from the first moment he encounters her: he seizes her by her clothes and brings her, willing or not, to his castle, where he refuses to let her leave. His clothing gifts are not powerful enough to counteract the violence he has shown her at their initial encounter, nor do they in any way assist him in solving the riddle of the belt.

All the clothing gifts discussed thus far have conformed to conventional uses of the vestimentary code of twelfth-century France. Nevertheless, the tendency among romance writers to uphold the vestimentary paradigm where gifts are concerned does not exclude some striking code manipulation. Bérout's *Tristan* offers a set of remarkable examples of significant and masterful reshaping of both the concept of largess and the clothing code. These examples are clustered around a central feature of the fragment of the romance: the attempts by the two lovers to exculpate themselves and restore themselves to their former status after the period of exile in the forest, both the initial steps taken toward reconciliation with Marc and the oath-swearing episode at Mal Pas.

On the first of these occasions, Yseut receives two remarkable gifts of clothing. The first, from the hermit Ogrin, facilitates the reconciliation between Marc and the queen. While Yseut and Tristan have lived in exile, hard times have destroyed their clothes: "Lor dras ronpent, rains

8. Lacy has asserted that her hair "serves not only as a symbol and reminder of Alexandre's and Soredamors's love but as the actual instrument by which it was discovered and encouraged by the queen" (*Craft* 83).

les decirent” (Their clothes were falling apart, destroyed by the branches) (vs. 1647). For the appeasement that he is arranging, Ogrin goes to purchase costly materials to be made into lovely clothes for Yseut, thereby replacing the courtly clothes that have become ragged throughout the years of exile.

Assés achate ver et gris,
 Dras de soie et de porpre bis,
 Escarlates et blanc chainsil,

 Ogrins l’ermite tant achate
 Et tant acroit et tant barate
 Pailles, vairs et gris et hermine
 Que richement vest la roïne.

(vss. 2735–37, 2741–44)

[After having bought vair and gris, silk cloth and dark *porpre*, scarlets and white linen . . . Ogrin the hermit bought, acquired, and bartered so much silk, vair, gris, and ermine that the queen was richly attired.]

Yseut is, in fact, reconciled with Marc, and through the mediation of the religious hermit, the representative of the church, she may once again wear the luxurious clothes befitting her status as queen.⁹ Later, Dinas makes a gift of clothing to Yseut, “un garnement / Que bien valoit cent mars d’argent, / Un riche paille fait d’orfrois” (a garment that was well worth a hundred marks of silver,¹⁰ a rich silk made of orphrey) (vss. 2985–87). This time, Yseut does not keep the gift but offers it in turn to the church (vs. 2990). Her action is in keeping with the medieval tradition of making gifts to churches. As Piponnier and Mane note: “Dans la hiérarchie des dons, les croyances médiévales placent au premier rang ceux faits à Dieu, c’est-à-dire

9. Heller had noted that Ogrin is perhaps France’s first recorded stylist, having done the shopping for Yseut; this is important not only because she could not take the risk to be seen out of hiding but also because it prevents her from entering into the mercantile economy, dealing with money, merchants, and transactions, all of which is beneath her station (*Fashion* 149). Interestingly, there is no mention of a monetary value, perhaps further protecting the lovers from mercantile activity, perhaps insulating Ogrin’s portrait from it slightly.

10. Since Bérout wrote in the Anglo-Norman dialect, it is likely that he also wrote in Norman England, and it would thus follow that the mark he refers to here is, in fact, the English mark, or sterling. This monetary unit was one of the most stable in Europe at the time, a sort of “gold standard,” suitable to evoke the costliness of a queen’s garment.

à ses représentants sur la terre, églises, abbayes ou couvents. Les puissants offrent aux cathédrales et églises qu'ils patronnent ou aux chapelles de pèlerinage qu'ils visitent des ornements liturgiques dont la somptuosité reflète la qualité du donateur" (34). Yseut's gift to the church, then, establishes her as a good Christian, which certainly contradicts the image of her as a traitorous adulteress, but it also answers the gift she has received from Ogrin. In a sense, she is repaying him for his generosity through an act of charity. Moreover, the author is careful to state the high monetary value of the garment, thereby making an assertion about Yseut's social rank.

These episodes regarding Yseut's clothes serve as a contrast to Tristan's situation. Once the couple turn themselves over to Ogrin in the hopes of reconciliation with Marc, Tristan also returns to Marc's land. Tristan, unlike the resplendent Yseut, is dressed to protect himself: "Souz son bliaut ot son hauberc; / Quar grant poor avoit de soi, / Por ce qu'il out mesfait au roi" (Under his *bliaut* he had his hauberk, for he was sore afraid for himself because he had done wrong to the king) (vss. 2772–74). He fears for his safety even as Yseut is regaled and her return celebrated. Moreover, whereas Yseut receives the gift from Dinas that allows her to make a costly and extravagant gift to the church, Tristan later conceals his identity, dressing as a leper, and begs for fine clothing from passersby. The disparate treatment that each of the two characters receives is analogous to the way in which they are dressed and receive clothing. Tristan's status remains as uncertain as that of a beggar, while Yseut's social rank is reasserted through lavish clothing gifts.¹¹

In fact, and at first glance perhaps curiously, Tristan earlier refuses to accept Marc's gift of riches and furs (vss. 2919–26). Tristan has come with Yseut to ask for Marc's pardon, but the king, on the advice of his barons, will not grant his pardon to Tristan, although, as a worried uncle, he offers him some material means to assist him. Tristan rejects the gift specifically in response to Marc's refusal to pardon him. The gift is insulting to Tristan, who prefers to make his fortune with another king at war than to accept a handout from Marc. Without Marc's pardon,

11. Kelly asserts that Yseut's rank is never really in question at any point in the romance. He, in fact, asserts that the apparent disparities between her attire and her station at certain points, as when she goes to be burned at the stake dressed in a magnificent court gown and later when she is reduced to wearing rags during her exile, are "so obvious, or would have been to Bérout's audience prepared to fix its attention on the obvious, that they required no authorial elucidation" ("Senpres" 131). Kelly also explains that though "Yseut's clothes may change from episode to episode, . . . it does not change the fact that she is queen and does deserve the clothing, surroundings, treatment that are her due and that we know to be her due whether she has them or not" (140).

the gift is devoid of all meaning, thus absurd. Tristan, whom Bérout consistently characterizes as a noble knight, is bound by duty to refuse such a gift. What is curious about Tristan's negative response to Marc's offer is that later, during the Mal Pas episode, he begs fine clothing from passersby, including King Arthur and, significantly, Marc. Why does Tristan accept a handout of clothing from Marc and others at this point when he rebuffed it on the previous occasion? Two factors must be considered in order to interpret his attitude and actions. First, Tristan is disguised as a leper, and no one recognizes him; he thus assumes a different identity. Had he accepted Marc's previous offer of clothing, he would have been accepting charity as himself. This charity would have confirmed, publicized, and moreover officialized Tristan's diminished status, the very status that he is desperately seeking to restore. The anonymity that the disguise affords Tristan at Mal Pas is precisely what allows him to accept charity without bringing shame to his name.

The second point to consider, although related to the first, is more far reaching and specifically concerns the covert nature of his acquisition of clothing at Mal Pas. Throughout Bérout's account, Tristan and Yseut have been illicit, and therefore hidden, lovers. To conceal their love, they have become masters of deceit and experts at covert maneuvers. Furthermore, because they must consistently deny and reject their love in public, the lovers have to value most what is veiled: their love. Once the love potion wears off during their exile in the forest, both lovers lament their degraded material conditions and desire a return to the former splendor of their lives at court (vss. 2160–2220). It is in this context that they decide to attempt a reconciliation with Marc, who responds to their plea by accepting Yseut back but refuses to allow Tristan to return. Tristan must, at this point, find other, stealthy means to restore himself to the material and vestimentary wealth that he previously enjoyed. Tristan had to reject the clothing that Marc offered because, as a handout, it contained no possibility of restoring his name. The episode at Mal Pas, however, of which Tristan's disguise as a leper is an integral and crucial part, provides a perfect opportunity for true reinstatement of both Tristan's and Yseut's place at court. Yseut's oath is contingent upon Tristan's appearance as a leper and exculpates them both, but his disguise also allows him clandestinely to acquire the vestimentary trappings of his prior, and soon to be recovered, status. His successful begging, then, answers Marc's offer of clothing, which is devoid of restitution. Tristan refuses the offer, preferring instead to take what is to his mind rightfully his through hidden means.

Tristan is not the only one among Béroul's characters to refuse a gift of clothing from a king. Arthur himself offers to make Yseut's servant a knight and give him knightly accouterments (vss. 3528–30). Perinis is alternately described as Yseut's "mesagier," her "meschin," and her "vaslez." His role during the separation of the two lovers is significant because he delivers messages from one to the other, as well as the message to Arthur from Yseut asking him to witness her oath. Arthur's motivation for making his offer to Perinis is to demonstrate both the respect he has for Yseut and the fact that he is quite impressed by the squire. Perinis, however, considers it unnecessary, if not entirely inappropriate. Since Perinis's sole mission is to assure Arthur's presence at the oath, Arthur's offer represents more than is needed; moreover, the lovers will be best served by Perinis's continuation as their messenger and by Arthur's bearing witness. It is likely that Perinis feels that Arthur's offer, if accepted, would be inconsistent with the rules of chivalry; he is, after all, in the service of someone else, thus not in a position to swear fealty to Arthur. In any case, Perinis's refusal is crucial for the text because of his role as Tristan and Yseut's messenger. Arthur's offer, then, attests to Perinis's suitability for knighthood, but his refusal confirms it. This refused clothing gift must be understood in light of the circumstances that determine Perinis's behavior; in any other context, his refusal remains inexplicable. Clearly, Béroul requires his readers to interpret even clothing gifts in consideration of their contexts, propelling the convention of largess into the signifying system that is emerging from the vestimentary code.

Tristan; Yseut; and even Perinis, their agent, are very sophisticated manipulators of appearance: it is precisely this ability that allows them to instill enough doubt in Marc's mind so that he can never fully and resolutely believe in their guilt.¹² Their modification of appearance is moreover accompanied by a highly developed ability to deploy the vestimentary code, especially the process of gift-giving. These two characters possess an impressive facility in choosing the context that will best accomplish their

12. Marc is, in fact, given to the misinterpretation of signs, as Lacy has noted ("Deception" 35). Lacy also records that even Tristan and Yseut are not immune to the misinterpretation of signs, for they misread Marc's message to them when he leaves his sword, ring, and glove with them as they sleep in the forest, taking them to mean that he is angry and will return to kill them (35). This lapse in their ability to interpret the signs that Marc leaves does not, however, detract from their ability to manipulate the code for their own purposes. Rather, it shows them in a very human light. Moreover, Corbellari proposes that the fact that the characters can so easily misread the codes suggests that the meanings of these symbols have become murky, unstable, and thus ambiguous, leading the protagonists down "fausses pistes interprétatives, destinées . . . à égarer un lecteur trop prompt à voir des symboles là où règne le *réel*" (163–64).

desires. In the same way that Yseut chooses the best possible location, that is, geographic context, for her oath in order for it to be beyond question, Tristan chooses the best social context to obtain the physical trappings, that is, noble clothing, of reconciliation with Marc and restoration of his former status as knight. Once Tristan has obtained these articles of clothing, Yseut's oath, dependent upon his disguise, makes official and overt the vestimentary emblems and covert restoration that Tristan has procured through begging. Tristan and Yseut effectively choose a context by which the meaning they desire to convey will be attached to the form of their actions. They alter the context of their clothing acts in order to create different meanings than otherwise would be possible. Of course, the author, Bérroul, is ultimately behind their genius; it is his own agility in manipulating the vestimentary code that he demonstrates through his characters' acts.

With regard to the convention of vestimentary gifts as portrayed in the romances of the twelfth century, two opposing tendencies are discernable. The first and most common is to represent the convention of largess in a highly normative way, emulating actual social practices. This tendency surely derives from a need, felt even among those who shaped the art of the period, to preserve and resist questioning such an important feature of the fabric of their society. Therefore, in romance, as in society, gifts from social superior to inferior solidify bonds and structure society. Clothing gifts also perform other functions within the romances, but these are as conventional and normative as the tokens of largess: restorative gifts, identificatory gifts, and love gifts. The other tendency, embraced primarily by Bérroul, represents nonetheless an important breach of an almost sacrosanct convention: his characters play freely with the system in order to serve their own needs and fulfill their desires. This feature of Bérroul's romance is truly revolutionary even though it falls within the larger context of sweeping code manipulations and subversions as practiced by his contemporaries. These code transgressions are particularly apparent in the depictions by romance writers of the clothing acts of dressing and undressing.

Dressing and Undressing in Context

The very acts of dressing and undressing alter a character's appearance; they are, after all, transformations of appearance. It is therefore quite natural that this kind of act depicted in romance would provide numerous examples of manipulations of the vestimentary code. In addition to alterations of the

code within character descriptions, code modifications may also include changes to the context in which a clothing reference occurs. These alterations mediate the connection between form and meaning, and, in some cases, allow for the creation of additional meanings for a unique form. It is precisely this kind of manipulation of a code that allows expansion into a fully developed signifying system in which not only do signifiers have an arbitrary relationship to their meaning, in the sense of a sign-oriented mentality, but also new, often multiple, meanings for old forms become possible.

I am using the term *context* to refer to a broad group of situations. Context may include any or all of the following overlapping levels: character elucidation, theme, plot, and narrative. The first of these situations, character elucidation, involves clothing acts that are best understood as providing important information about such character traits as personality, inner being, or development. In *Perceval* the hero's final scene involves a significant disarming act: Perceval removes his arms after the pilgrims admonish him for wearing his armor on Good Friday (vss. 6217–6518). Perceval's motivation for disarming is to remove from himself the shame of having become entirely self-absorbed and mindlessly devoted to the Arthurian realm, but the meaning of his act is much broader and deeper. His removal of arms reminds us of his late mother's wish that he never wear armor, never become a knight, and his two uncles' wish that he fulfill his destiny with them rather than through the emptiness of Arthurian chivalry. His act of disarming functionally erases his status as a knight and restores his status as a family member.¹³ Perceval enters the text with his first encounter with knights; he leaves the text with his renunciation of the incomplete and imperfect Arthurian knighthood. Not only does Perceval's final disarming act close the narrative thread opened by his movement away from his mother and her family's values through his departure and initial arming, but it also clearly shows that Perceval's character has, through a series of actions that shape his character in the eyes of the world around him, come full circle as he finally understands that his own character can only be truly and completely realized in the context of his own identity as a member of

13. In fact, his final disarming inversely reflects his initial arming. This first arming, as Lénat points out and calls typical for the period, is a completely secular affair (198–99). Lénat makes clear that “la chevalerie, qui n'est pas née du christianisme, est jalouse de conserver sa nature première et tend à rejeter tout ce qui pourrait la contraindre ou l'altérer” (195). Considering the opposing natures and goals of “chevalerie” and “clergie,” it is not surprising that Perceval must so definitively choose between the two.

his family rather than as a knight of the Round Table. His final clothing act has far more meaning than that of a standard disarming. Perceval is not disarming himself as he steps away from a battlefield; he is laying aside knighthood, at least in the terms in which the Arthurian realm imagines it. His act, then, signifies this renunciation and represents a defining, if not *the* defining, moment of his life.

Clothing acts that must be interpreted in thematic context are those acts that advance the theme of a romance. In *Jaufre*, for example, a major theme is the need to question appearances.¹⁴ After King Arthur arms himself to fight the mysterious and enormous bird, he learns that the bird is nothing more than an enchanter wishing to bring Arthur an adventure (vss. 9867–82). Arthur’s arming himself is a clothing act whose meaning is understandable only if we consider the theme of faulty appearances, because the act, we quickly learn, is without any real purpose, since there is never any real danger to the king or anyone else. Just as in the opening sequence about the enchanter’s transformation into a beast who kidnaps Arthur for a while (vss. 226–484), the encounter with the bird results only from the enchanter’s desire to provide Arthur with an adventure. Throughout *Jaufre* appearances can be confusing and tricksters abound, and this scene demonstrates the importance of questioning those appearances. Arthur’s arming himself suggests that even the king needs to protect himself against this sort of visual confusion. The “danger” seems in fact to be simply the risk of falling prey to these false appearances or misinterpreting an appearance, as happens later in the text in a similar danger-free arming scene. When Jaufré and Brunissen’s people are journeying home, Fada comes to meet them to thank them, with a feast and gifts, for rescuing her (vss. 10360–73). At her approach, however, Jaufré and Melian are afraid that she means mischief, so they arm themselves. Fada even taunts the knights for their inability to understand her purpose in coming into their camp. In both these examples, however, falling

14. This discrepancy between appearance and reality has been analyzed by Suzanne Fleishman as a larger, socially based one through which the conventions of romance provide one vision of knighthood, whereas the social reality was much less stable. She asserts that this discrepancy is the precise origin of the irony and parody of *Jaufre*: “If adventure is not being carried out properly, if one of its essential ingredients—the fantastic—surfaces only in distorted form, if the hero continually encounters situations in which his values and behavior are at odds with his surroundings and where antagonists seem to ignore the rules of the game, then clearly this suggests something about the viability of knightly ethos informing chivalric romance” (104). She concludes that the “creator of *Jaufre* was a skilled practitioner in his genre, a conscious craftsman who assumed the task of underscoring the gap between a disjointed social reality and anachronistic idealization of it that formed the stuff of conventional Arthurian romance” (129).

prey to appearances also presents no real danger, for Arthur appreciates the adventure and Jaufré and Melian receive only good-natured teasing from Fada. Also in both instances, the ostensible motivation for arming oneself is protection, but each scene ultimately serves to articulate and highlight a major theme of the romance—the necessity of questioning appearances.

The functional emptiness of a knight's arming himself may also communicate much more than the necessity of more closely evaluating appearances. Arthur's insistence in *Perceval* that Gauvain wear his armor to coax Perceval to return with him to Arthur's court (vss. 4348–4500) results in an arming act whose purpose is to demonstrate a tremendous lack in the Arthurian chivalric realm. After Sagremor and Keu are each defeated by Perceval, Gauvain decides that he should like to approach this young knight (who is contemplating the drops of blood in the snow) in a nonthreatening manner, by going unarmed to speak with him and ask him to come to court rather than going to fight with him. Keu quickly insults Gauvain by subtly accusing him of cowardice. Gauvain explains that he is simply trying to approach this man in a human fashion, but Arthur urges him to wear his armor.

“Ore i alés, niez, dist li rois,
Que molt avez dit que cortois.
S'estre puet, si l'en amenez,
Mais totes vos armes portez
Car desarmez n'irez vos pas.”

(vss. 4413–17)

[“Go ahead then nephew, said the king, for you have spoken very courteously. If you are able, bring him back, but wear all your arms, for unarmed, you will not go.”]

Here, Arthur is saying to his nephew, “Go, and be as courteous as you wish, but be a knight first. Wear your armor.” Gauvain does as his uncle wishes and wears his armor, but he addresses Perceval “Sans faire nul felon samblant” (doing nothing uncourtly seeming) (vs. 4434). Unlike his negative reaction to Sagremor's and Keu's threats, Perceval's reaction to Gauvain's genteel tone and patient understanding is positive. Gauvain alone has risen to the occasion that Perceval has offered to Arthur's knights, understanding that there exists a means other than through the knightly order, represented by armor, to behave toward another. Yet Gauvain's strict and almost blind allegiance

to the king thwarts his attempt to participate in it fully, as evidenced by his wearing his armor despite his inclinations to the contrary.¹⁵ This moment most clearly indicates that Perceval will surpass the order of the Arthurian realm. Gauvain does succeed in bringing Perceval to the court, but the two remove their armor before they enter, signifying that they have made human rather than knightly contact. Sagremor and Keu's arming acts in this episode actually create the danger for the knights, whereas Gauvain's arming is functionally empty, since his attitude toward Perceval protects him from the harm that befell the two other knights. Gauvain's functionless arming is similar to the examples from *Jaufre* inasmuch as it reflects and articulates a major theme of *Perceval*, the theme of insufficiency in the Arthurian realm. In the case here as well as in the two cases in *Jaufre*, the arming act has no real purpose but must be understood in the thematic context of the work in order to have meaning. The form of the arming act does not, in these cases, signify protection; rather, the connection between form and meaning must expand to include the interpretation of the act in another—the thematic—context of the romance as a whole.

Another context that often must be considered in order to produce meaning for a clothing act is at the level of the plot. In such instances, clothing acts become both features and motivators of plot. For example, a clothing gift often opens a sequence of actions that requires closure by some form of reciprocation, usually another gift. The first gift is a feature of the plot—it is part of what happens—at the same time that it precipitates further actions, being itself an instigator. The clothing act must then be considered both in terms of its form—a gift that may confer any number of aspects upon the recipient—and of its context as an important feature and motivator of additional acts or actions. In *Cligés*, Guenevere's gift to Alexandre of the *chemise* into which Soredamors has sewn one of her hairs is an honoring gesture that rewards Alexandre's allegiance to Arthur, but it is also an important plot motivator inasmuch as it occasions the free expression of the secret love that exists between Alexandre and Soredamors (vss. 1545–1636). Guenevere's gift is a signifier with two meanings: it conveys the esteem that Arthur's court bears Alexandre, and, considered in its plot context, it gives rise to a second, deeper meaning—the facilitator of the expression of love. In Thomas's account of *Tristan*, there is an even more complex clothing act

15. Chrétien uses Gauvain as a counterpoise for his heroes in three of his romances—*Lancelot*, *Yvain*, and *Perceval*. Moreover, as Lacy notes, in *Perceval*, Gauvain “serves as a chivalrous model for Perceval, but he is a model to be surpassed” (*Craft* 100).

that must be interpreted in its plot context. On Tristan's wedding night, as his attendants undress him to prepare him to go to bed with the "false" Yseut, they dislodge the ring that Yseut gave him as a pledge of their love and commitment to each other (vss. 440–59). The main undressing act, in which Tristan refuses to assume the role of agent because of his feelings for the "real" Yseut, precipitates the second undressing act, the dislodging of the ring, and he withdraws into his brooding mind. He later tells her he has a malady that prevents lovemaking, thereby excusing himself from it (vss. 676–97). Once Tristan becomes aware of the ring again, his feelings for the real Yseut are laid bare. His undressing for what would have been a night of carnal love with his new wife ends with the unveiling of his true feelings and the commitment he shares with his true love. The first undressing act's primary meaning is the expression of Tristan's nonengagement in the proceedings: by refusing to undress himself he refuses his own agency. The act, however, precipitates another act—the dislodging of the ring. This second act's primary meaning is the remembrance of the vows taken with the "real" Yseut, and the second act in turn precipitates the lie he tells the "false" Yseut to avoid sleeping with her. Both related acts thus have double meanings, and both precipitate further action. The ability to derive these secondary meanings resides in the interpretation of these acts in their specific plot moments and as plot motivators.

The last of the four categories of context is the broadest—the narrative context. Clothing acts in this category of code manipulation perform specific narrative functions and assist in the elaboration of the narrative. A fascinating example of this category occurs at the end of *Le Bel Inconnu* as Arthur's knights are preparing for the tournament called to lure Guinglain back to court for his marriage to Blonde Esmerée (vss. 5459–97, 5581–5609). In this case, the knights' act of arming themselves takes up a considerable narrative space, and the tournament itself takes up some 637 lines almost at the very end of the romance. The author has his audience witness an elaborate arming scene, followed by a huge two-day tournament, just before escaping his auctorial duties, which is not unlike Guinglain's arming himself to escape three times from the two ladies who love him. The knight first arms himself to escape from Blanches Mains in order to champion Blonde Emerée's cause (vss. 2479–83). Then, after completing his mission, he escapes Blonde Esmerée by arming himself for an imaginary mission so he can find Blanches Mains again (vss. 3875–79). Finally, when he hears about the tournament, he decides to don his armor again over Blanches Mains' objections (vss. 5363–83). Renaut finally imitates his protagonist by suiting up the Arthurian world for a

tournament, after which he runs away from his auctorial duties by leaving his protagonist hanging between two women and his audience hanging between two possible endings.¹⁶

Mais por un biau sanblant mostrer
 vos feroit Guinglain retrover
 s'amie que il a perdue,
 qu'entre ses bras le tenroit nue.
 Se de çou li faites delai,
 si ert Guinglains en tel esmai
 que ja mais n'avera s'amie.

(vss. 6255–61)

[But if you show a happy countenance, you will make Guinglain find again his lost love and hold her in his arms nude. But if in this you make delay, then Guinglain will have the sorrow of never seeing his love again.]

Renaut provides Guinglain with a vestimentary guise that allows him to accomplish his purpose: his motivation for arming himself is to leave a lady. Guinglain's purposes do not exactly correspond to those of Renaut, however, since Renaut wishes to keep his lady by leaving the ending of the romance open.¹⁷ Renaut's ending is an amplification of Guinglain's repeated escaping, but its purpose is opposite, namely, to assure his lady's continued favor. Therefore, the narrative function of Guinglain's escape through arming himself is to provide Renaut with an escape strategy from the narrative itself. Renaut uses a formally similar device to accomplish one shared purpose, escape, and one set of opposite purposes—leaving a lady versus keeping a lady. The narrative function of this device changes depending on who uses it: Guinglain's use prefigures and facilitates Renaut's, and Renaut's use ends the romance. If we do not consider the sequential arming acts in

16. The double ending of the romance has been the subject of several studies. Most notable are those by Peter Haidu ("Realism"), Sara Sturm ("*Bel Inconnu's* Enchantress"), Alice Colby-Hall ("Frustration and Fulfillment"), and Laurence de Looze ("Generic Clash").

17. Claude Roussel points to *Le Bel Inconnu* as "une oeuvre ouverte" precisely because of its "fin incertaine" (31). He attests, moreover, to the fact that one of the main achievements of the romance is that it conditions readers for such an ending through "la multiplication des fins possibles" throughout the romance and contends that we really cannot ignore "le jeu narratif que représente la juxtaposition en enfilade de ces fins attendues, puis différées, qui contribuent pour une large part au plaisir de la lecture" (31–32).

this narrative context, the full meaning of it eludes us. The armings have a standard meaning of preparation for battle or adventure, but they also have an additional meaning that is only discernible when the narrative strategy of the author is examined. In this narrative context, the armings have the meaning of escape.

Having established the different contexts that have an effect upon the meaning of signifiers, my discussion may turn to a demonstration of the ways in which formally similar clothing acts have different and sometimes multiple meanings based upon these different contexts.¹⁸ The persistence of the gift as a normative clothing act shows that the vestimentary code continues to exist in the corpus of twelfth-century romance and to exert itself as a viable means of expression. Even so, the writers of the period do not seem to hesitate to modify their use of the code, to manipulate or even subvert it to suit their needs. As surely as they manipulate the code, they are transforming it into a signifying system and coming to rely upon the flexibility of the sign in its capacity to represent and convey the arbitrariness and ambiguity that was beginning to be felt in the world. The shift in the representational devices from a symbol-dominated universe toward one imbued with the ambivalence inherent in the sign, that is, from an absolute relationship between form and meaning to contingent meanings, will be best clarified by tracing the use of formally similar clothing acts in light of the transition from highly codified use of clothing to context-dependent uses that require interpretation rather than simply the reading of symbols. The first set of examples involves acts in which one character dresses another, and the second concerns acts in which a character dresses him- or herself. Each of these acts and their different manifestations will be examined in turn.

Dressing another person, according to the standard meaning within the vestimentary code, is an honoring act.¹⁹ This is certainly the case in *Erec et Enide* during the elaborate dressing scenes that punctuate the romance (vss. 1563–1652, 6671–6747). There are many other examples of characters

18. If clothing acts are reduced to four basic formal categories, which include dressing oneself, undressing oneself, dressing another, and undressing another, different meanings may be ascribed to acts from the same category, depending upon the context. In the category of dressing oneself, for example, the meaning of the act may be to honor another, to prepare oneself for adventure or battle (if the act involves armor), to prepare oneself to return to action, or to promote oneself. The act of undressing another is equally if not more flexible in its meaning, insofar as it may be an honoring, curative, or even dishonoring act.

19. In the corpus of twelfth-century romance, the act of dressing another person is almost invariably honoring or curative in both intent and effect. However, this fact does not preclude the existence of other effects arising from these acts.

communicating their esteem for another character through dressing acts. In *Lancelot*, the hero's hosts give him, at almost every home that lodges him, a fur mantle; occasionally he receives the mantle directly from the shoulders of another person. This last gesture in particular is a sign of extreme deference. Blancheflor's people honor Perceval by bringing a fur mantle for him to wear (*Perceval* vs. 1779), and Augier's daughter treats Jaufré in a similar fashion (*Jaufre* vss. 4483–84). Lanval is dressed richly by his lady's maidens before they send him back into the world (*Lanval* vs. 173–76). Finally, when Guinglain first arrives in Arthur's court, attendants come to dress him well (*Bel Inconnu* vss. 91–95). In all of these cases, the dressing act communicates the respectful attitude of one character or set of characters toward another.

There are, however, honorific acts of dressing another that have more complex meanings than simply honoring that person and show a clear tendency toward the use of clothing as a signifying system. Philomena, for example, is in the habit of dressing her father every day (*Philomena* vs. 375). Her habit of dressing him not only shows her respect and love for him, but it also provides her father with a reason to cite when he disallows her leaving to accompany Tereus. More important, though, it emphasizes her ability to manipulate cloth, which later serves her well in exacting revenge upon Tereus, as she weaves a tapestry that communicates her plight to her sister and brings about her rescue. Philomena's act of dressing her father must be placed in the context both of plot and character elucidation in order for the full range of its meaning to be discerned. The plot is advanced by her habit of dressing her father because it provides him with his first attempt at justifying his refusal to allow Tereus to take his daughter away from him. Moreover, the character elucidation that her action facilitates is both immediate, in that it honors her father, and delayed, in that it prefigures her competence at using cloth to communicate with her sister and to translate her muted voice into materiality. The signifier of Philomena's habitual dressing act therefore has multiple meanings that are mediated by several different contexts.

Dressing another person may also take a slightly different form in addition to having different meanings. In *Le Bel Inconnu* Guinglain sends Blonde Esmerée to Arthur's court, encouraging her to dress very well (vss. 3630–34). The supposed purpose of her mission is to gain Arthur's blessing for Guinglain's marriage to her. Guinglain, however, is in love with a different woman and thus sends Blonde Esmerée to court in an attempt to delay, if not avert, this marriage. Once she departs, Guinglain goes to seek his love, Blanches Mains. Arthur, for his part, agrees that Guinglain should

marry Blonde Esmerée, and when it becomes clear that the knight is in no hurry to return to the court, Arthur decides to host a tournament to lure him (vss. 5196–5300). As a knight, Guinglain cannot resist such a temptation and leaves his lady to participate. Once Guinglain is there, Arthur expresses his wish for him to take Blonde Esmerée as his wife, which he does (vss. 6166–92). Guinglain's plan has failed, but the reason behind this failure is that, although his motivation in sending Blonde Esmerée to court is to avoid marrying her, having her do so in such a way that honors the king is the narrative equivalent of Guinglain's honoring him himself. In sending Blonde Esmerée away in this manner, Guinglain reasserts the power that Arthur has over him, and therefore binds himself to Arthur's decision. In this case, Guinglain's figurative dressing of Blonde Esmerée is a mediated honoring of Arthur that precipitates Guinglain's acquiescence to his will. The meaning of the act is discernible through consideration of the act in terms of its plot context, since it is through this means that we understand the importance of the encouraged act in submitting Guinglain's will to Arthur's. In the same way that Guinglain essentially dresses Blonde Esmerée for the court, Arthur will determine Guinglain's choice of bride. Both are mediated, the first through Blonde Esmerée, the second through the tournament. Moreover, the second is precipitated by and answers the first. Thus, Guinglain's act, though indirect, means both his reluctance to marry Blonde Esmerée and his ultimate acceptance of it. The single act not only has two meanings, but two opposite meanings.

From these examples it is clear how context can mediate meaning for a single form. What is also apparent, however, is that not only did writers take the liberty of placing formally similar clothing acts in different contexts to derive new meanings for them, but they were also perfectly capable of altering the form of the act to incorporate additional nuance and texture from the code. Again, the evidence points to the fact that the writers did not destroy the vestimentary code but incorporated it into their works, finding it useful to employ as it commonly existed in order to exploit its expressiveness, but were equally capable at its manipulation in order to exploit clothing more fully as a sign. I turn my attention now to the second of the two forms of dressing acts that I wish to examine in terms of context mediating meaning—a character's dressing him- or herself.

In the context of the vestimentary code, it is common for characters to dress up to honor a special person or occasion, and often this dressing act occurs as a result of the overcoming of a lack or as part of the effort to overcome a shortcoming of some sort. In *Jaufre*, once Jaufré has defeated

Taulat and freed Melian, he receives a hero's welcome both when he returns to Augier's castle (vss. 6784–97) and when he returns to Brunissen's (vss. 7092–7151). In both places, the inhabitants dress up to celebrate his victorious return, and Brunissen additionally has the streets festooned with fabric to honor him further. Celebratory scenes of this nature abound in the romances, and their examples are too numerous to include here; I discuss this example to demonstrate the normative behavior. Thus, the welcome that Jaufré receives may be considered the normal expression of joyful celebration after the accomplishment of the surmounting of some obstacle.

The deficiency may be personal as well as societal and may take the form of a personal dressing to designate having overcome a lack. Such is the case in *Perceval* when Blancheflor dresses herself after she realizes that Perceval is committed to helping her.

A l'ajorner s'en retorna
 La pucele en sa chambre arriere;
 Sanz pucele et sanz chamberiere
 Se vesti et appareilla,
 C'onques nului n'i esveilla.

(vss. 2070–74)

[When day broke, the maiden returned to her chamber again; without (the aid of a) maid or a chambermaid, she dressed and adorned herself, awakening no one at all.]

Brunissen has the same reaction after the night spent with Jaufré (*Jaufre* vss. 7673–75). In both these instances, the lady's unassisted dressing communicates her recent empowerment in an untenable situation. Lancelot also dresses himself after Meleagant's sister cures him following his imprisonment (*Lancelot* vss. 6673–77), and, in *Yvain*, the hero, once cured of his madness, quickly dresses himself in the clothing that the damsels have left for him to find (vss. 3020–35). In both cases, the knights have been restored to their usual vigor and prowess and are thus ready to reassert themselves as knights and heroes. Finally, once the wounds Erec has received during his wanderings are completely healed, Guivret and his people insist on accompanying him, and the text states that Erec, Enide, Guivret, and the others “tuit s'atornent et aparueillent” (all dressed and readied themselves) (*Erec* vs. 5245). Here, the community's dressing itself signals a social healing that both amplifies and underscores the social nature of the marital

reconciliation between Erec and Enide, and foreshadows the social healing that Erec's coronation signals at the end of the romance. In all these cases, the purpose of the self-dressing is to reenter the world, and it communicates the character's wholeness following a difficult period, a lack of some sort. A character may preemptively dress well to come before the king to solicit his assistance in overcoming a problem or difficulty. Such acts both honor the king and project hope by prefiguring the vestimentary celebration that will follow a successful resolution.

At the beginning of *Le Bel Inconnu*, Hélié arrives in Arthur's court dressed in samite, a very costly, brilliantly ornate fabric, with a richly dressed dwarf accompanying her in order to plead for assistance in the form of a champion (vss. 137–70). Later, Hélié's dramatic entrance into the court is reflected and amplified when Blonde Esmerée comes into Arthur's court beautifully attired, after having spent a week preparing the fabrics and other necessities before setting out on her journey (vss. 3629–40, 3661–68, 3836–58). She has also taken a great amount of care grooming herself in a luxurious tent directly before coming to see the king (vss. 5142–80). She comes to honor Arthur as king, but also to honor his authority over Jaufré, specifically his authority to choose a wife for him. Like Hélié before her, she asks a favor of the king: to give his blessing to Jaufré's marriage to her. In both of these instances, the supplicant's purpose serves the same narrative function in the text. Hélié and Blonde Esmerée honor the court by dressing well, and the court responds by honoring their requests. This type of clothing act may, like the celebration scenes in *Jaufre*, be considered a normative one: a character's dressing well to go before a person of rank or authority is encompassed in the vestimentary code and represents no divergence from it. Clearly, then, the code persists as a viable means for communicating attitudes in the romances of the period, although this simple and codified relationship between form and meaning is not the only option for the vestimentary signifier.

In *Erec et Enide*, following the episode in which Erec overhears Enide lamenting his abandonment of chivalric exploits, the heroine must find a means to resolve the obstacle in her marriage with the hero. Enide's dressing herself in her best gown on Erec's orders represents Enide's movement toward resolution of the difficulty (vss. 2572–79, 2607–11). It is precisely because Erec has doubts about his wife's opinion of him that Erec submits her to the test of the travels. The lack that Erec attributes to her is but a perceived lack, for she loves and cares deeply for him. What she really lacks is her husband's faith in her devotion to him. Her solitary dressing results from

her husband's doubt but also foreshadows the proof that she will eventually provide of her devotion. Enide's motivation in performing this dressing act is to please her husband and ultimately disprove his doubts, and the narrative function of her act is to prefigure her success in proving herself to him and to accentuate her own agency in overcoming the obstacle in her marriage.²⁰

In *Perceval*, the hero also must dress himself while in a position of lack, but in his case, the lack is real rather than imagined. When Perceval wakes after the night spent at the Grail Castle, no one answers him and no one comes to assist him in his preparations to leave (vss. 3373–77). This treatment differs greatly from that which he received from the castle inhabitants upon his arrival. Like Enide, he does not wish to dress himself. Yet unlike her, he is unaware of the reason that he must. Whereas Enide has what she needs, but must prove it, Perceval not only does not have what he needs but is completely unaware of his need or lack. He has failed to ask the Grail question, and the absence of the castle's inhabitants for his dressing indicates their tremendous disappointment in him. Perceval's motivation in dressing himself is simply to be on his way, but the narrative function of this scene is to communicate the disappointment of the Fisher King and his attendants. Unfortunately, the message is completely lost upon Perceval.

The same form—a character's dressing well—does not always convey the same meaning. Indeed, there are many cases in which a writer alters the code by changing the context. In *Thèbes*, for example, Jocasta and her two daughters dress richly to go to speak with Polyneices (vss. 4038–4104). Jocasta is going to plead with her son to end the fighting, and to do so, she opens a mutual honoring cycle in which the women's dress communicates their esteem for Polyneices while encouraging him to reciprocate by honoring their request. Thus far, the standard vestimentary code is in operation: the women have dressed well to honor their son and brother. But Polyneices refuses to accept peace on the terms they propose. From a normative standpoint, the purpose of Jocasta's and her daughters' dressing up remains unfulfilled: the act has failed to gain Polyneices's favor. Nonetheless, their attention to dress has not been for nothing. It will serve a different purpose in the text. Upon seeing the beautifully attired Antigone, whose dress

20. Enide does not simply submit to Erec's will: she repeatedly disobeys his command that she remain silent whenever she feels that her speaking out can protect him from harm. Each time she does so, however, she pays dearly for her action through her husband's continued consternation, despite the fact that her actions are in his best interest. In the end, Erec realizes that her actions are not acts of defiance but of protection, and his faith in his wife's intentions is renewed.

accentuates her natural beauty and nobility, the Greek Parthenopeus falls in love with her and becomes her suitor.²¹ At this point the two sisters each have suitors, one on either side of the dispute (Ismène's suitor, Ates, is Theban), and, although they never categorically take sides, their loyalties effectively split in order for them to support their respective knights. Jocasta's four children, then, are evenly divided, so that in the end, both camps feel the tragedy of loss equally. Both daughters' suitors are killed, as are both sons. Thus, although Jocasta's mission fails, it occasions the establishment of absolute balance within the romance's central tragedy. The *Thèbes* poet has led his audience carefully through a clear and significant manipulation of the vestimentary code. The poet first explains the women's clothing act in the context of the code: their act symbolically communicates their respect as they ask a favor. Yet, in thwarting this attempt, thereby denying the act its normative value, the poet then makes possible and explicit a new meaning for the act. While preserving the form, he requires his audience to interpret the act in light of a particular narrative context—the balance of the tragedy and its effect on the family. The clothing act is stripped of its codified meaning and given a new, contextualized meaning.

Whereas the *Thèbes* example above illustrates the manipulation of the code by shifting a clothing act's context to extract new meaning, Erec's insistence in *Erec et Enide* that Enide not improve her dress for her arrival in Arthur's court (vss. 1353–58) demonstrates an outright subversion of the code. Here, Erec's double purpose in keeping Enide in her ragged dress is identical to the double narrative function that it serves—to honor the authority of the queen by giving her exclusive rights to dressing Enide, and to honor Enide by insisting that only a queen is fit to clothe her. Chrétien has employed an unexpected indicator of the honor Erec wishes to show these two ladies: rather than dress Enide well, the norm in this situation, he will keep her dressed inappropriately. He has subverted the code by keeping Enide dressed in what would be, from a normative standpoint, inappropriate clothing for the occasion. This example clearly demonstrates the movement from an entirely motivated and absolute vestimentary code (in which dressing well unequivocally means honoring another) toward a system of representation that requires the interpretation of signs so that here, because of particular circumstances, dressing poorly actually honors

21. Joachim Bumke reminds us that the inclusion of details of dress in the portraits of ladies tend to reveal a great deal about the lady's standing in courtly society and show "the link between the appearance in society and the splendor of a courtly outfit" (144).

another, since Guenevere is the only one worthy of dressing Enide. The form of the clothing act is, in this case, not simply interpreted in context: the context totally determines the form. The subversion of the normative vestimentary code is so complete here that without an understanding of the unique context in which it occurs, the clothing act, or refusal to allow to act, is utterly incomprehensible. In this instance, meaning derives from context rather than from form. Moreover, that context surpasses form in the determination of meaning offers strong evidence of the shift from a monolithic semiotic code to a more fluid signifying system in which contingent rather than absolute meanings predominate. In this example, furthermore, not only are new meanings created, but new forms are as well. The societal implications of such a radical shift in the assignment of meaning remain rooted in the tensions between the nobility, who desired an immutable meaning for themselves in the social hierarchy, and the merchants, who challenged this fixedness by the very fact that their success was determined by ability rather than by birth.

Making and Destroying Clothes

The making of clothing, and the fabric required for it, occupied a special place in medieval society. According to Weiner and Schneider, cloth manufacture itself has traditionally been reserved for

spinners, weavers, dyers, and finishers [who] harness the imagined blessings of ancestors and divinities to inspire or animate the product, and draw analogies between weaving or dyeing and the life cycle of birth, maturation, death, and decay. The ritual and discourse that surround its manufacture establish cloth as a convincing analog for the regenerative and degenerative processes of life, and as a great connector, binding humans not only to each other but to the ancestors of their past and the progeny who constitute their future. (3)

It is indeed no surprise that we still today refer metaphorically to the “fabric of society.” If gifts of cloth and clothing, among other valuables, create binding social ties, the manufacture of cloth does no less. The industries providing the raw materials for cloth production included a great variety of different vocations: farming, raising livestock, manufacturing dyestuffs.

In addition, merchants and traders transported goods to where they were needed. Production also required the work of spinners, weavers, dyers, finishers, and other laborers. The people involved in these commercial relationships were diverse, from different backgrounds and social classes, and of both sexes. Therefore, cloth, in a very real sense, bound society together.

In the Middle Ages, certain types of activities were carried out primarily by men and others primarily by women. Traditionally, spinning, weaving, cutting, and sewing fell into the domain of women's work.²² Later, as cloth production was steadily becoming an industry of professionals and was increasingly organized and as the technology that supported such production was advancing and becoming more complicated, men began to take over certain formerly female-dominated occupations within the manufacturing process.²³ This shift in the gender assignments of tasks seems to have begun, very predictably, in the larger production centers and to have started as early as the eleventh century, when the horizontal treadle loom began to replace the vertical loom in commercial production (Crowfoot, Pritchard, and Staniland 22).²⁴ It is important to note, however, that changes of this nature occur over time, and it was certainly the case that at the same time that men were taking over certain occupations in cloth manufacture, women continued to have a significant presence in them for quite a while. In fact, the period during which both men and women were professional producers of cloth stretches over a very long period indeed. Moreover, despite the fact that this shift was occurring in the urban cloth centers, spinning, cutting, and sewing, as well as

22. Andrée Lehmann has pointed out that women continued to be the only practitioners of certain trades, such as silk spinning and weaving, hemp and flax dressing, and the production of silk items and garments (436). David Hearlihy treats women's contribution to the cloth trade and their working conditions in *Opera Muliebria*. For a discussion of the attitudes toward the distribution of women's work in the textile trade, see Ruth Mazo Karras's "This Skill in a Woman is By No Means Despised." For a discussion of women's involvement in the guilds, see Maryanne Kowaleski and Judith M. Bennett's "Crafts, Guilds, and Women in the Middle Ages."

23. During the course of the Middle Ages, men began to join with women in such enterprises as commercial embroidery, spinning, and weaving, although women continued to exert a strong presence in these fields. Other trades, however, began to be more and more taken over by men, who were organized into guilds, such as furriers, tailors, tapestry makers, and dyers (Lehmann 436-37).

24. The advantages of the horizontal treadle loom are multiple. Worked by two people, it allows for greater fabric widths and lengths and therefore a more efficient production, as well as making certain weaving techniques, such as texture, possible (Crowfoot, Pritchard, and Staniland et al. 22-23).

private cloth production, continued to be decidedly female tasks until well after the twelfth century.

Nonetheless, twelfth-century romance in France appears to be responding to just this type of gender ambivalence concerning cloth production. These instances are of interest for this study because they once again bear witness to the inscription of ambiguity into the vestimentary code. Further, the ambivalence inscribed by at least two instances pertains to far more than simply gender ambivalence: in depicting the making of cloth in their romances, writers are also providing a deft metaphor for the very process in which they themselves are engaging. The weavers of romance depict weavers of tapestry and makers of fine cloth, all of whom push the meaning of their labor to its very fullest in order to create new meanings. In a sense, the writers depict themselves and their project in the acts of these characters. The process of making cloth and clothing is indeed the most natural place for writers to demonstrate their own process of creating meaning through manipulation of the existing vestimentary code.

My discussion of the making of clothing begins, however, with an examination of the gender ambivalence that appears in two particular textual cases.²⁵ Both of these examples have in common that, in the end, they problematize the notion that making clothing or cloth is women's work. First, the knight Jaufré refuses to engage in women's work. The Knight of the White Lance promises to let Jaufré pass unharmed if he will renounce knightly pleasures and no longer wear clothes that he has not made himself ("ni vestiment / Non portes si el nol teisia" [*Jaufre* vss. 1448–49]). Although the list of conditions contains items that do not involve Jaufré's making his own clothes, this is the one he seizes on as most absurd. He asks, "E si no sai far vestimens?" (And if I do not know how to make clothes?) (vs. 1455), to which the White Knight responds that he will have him taught: "Eu t'o farai mot ricamens . . . ensinar, / Teiser e cozr e talar" (I will have you expertly taught to weave and sew and cut) (vss. 1456–58). Jaufré insists that he would have too much difficulty learning (vss. 1461–62), but the White Knight believes it would take a strong man like Jaufré only seven years to learn (vss. 1463–64).²⁶ In the end, Jaufré prefers to fight the knight, thereby reasserting his knighthood. Interestingly, Jaufré does not seem to fear any kind of social demotion from knightly status, but rather worries about his ability

25. A modified version of this discussion appears in my "De fil d'or et de soie."

26. Caroline Jewers has noted that the White Knight's estimation of the length of time it would take Jaufré to learn to sew was the same time span necessary for Charlemagne to conquer Spain, and she points to this as the "sly humor" of the romance ("The Name of the Ruse" 192).

to learn women's work. It appears that Jaufré is rather accepting of, or at the very least not outraged by, the gender ambivalence that the knight is proposing, even though he fights him to avoid his proposition. It is seemingly not the reversal of gender roles that so bothers Jaufré but his perceived lack of ability and the prospect of wasting time.

An important counterexample to Jaufré's acceptance of gender ambivalence occurs in *Enéas* with the character of Camille, the queen of Vulcane and a female knight. Camille does not accept gender ambivalence: she simultaneously defies and insists upon it.²⁷ The text makes clear that Camille is not typical woman of her day, preferring war to traditional women's work:

el fu toz tens norrie an guerre
 et molt ama chevalerie
 et maintint la tote sa vie.
 Onc d'ovre a feme ne ot cure,
 ne de filer ne de costure.

(vss. 3968–72)

[She was all the time trained in war and loved knighthood well and practiced it all her life. Never did she care for women's work: neither spinning nor sewing.]

Her nonconformist attitude, in addition to her great skill as a warrior, occasionally attracts criticism from male knights.²⁸ During a battle, Tarcon, a Trojan knight taunts her:

“Laissiez ester desmesurance,
 metez jus l'escu et la lance
 et le hauberc, qui trop vos blece,
 et ne mostrez votre proëce.
 Ce ne est pas vostre mestier,

27. As noted in Chapter 3, Camille's very name is imbued with the gender ambivalence that her character embodies: her name is both masculine and feminine in French.

28. Simon Gaunt has analyzed the gender roles in *Enéas* and has postulated that in the romance—into which an amplification of two thousand lines is inserted in Virgil's original treatment of the scene in which Enéas falls in love with Lavine—femininity, although taking on a larger role, creates a dialogical gender discourse that devalues the female (*Gender* 85). He notes two homophobic diatribes that “reinforce a rigid notion of sexual difference, predicated to a large extent on sexuality” (79). However, he does not treat the character of Camille, who seems to me to be the counterpoint to his argument.

mes filer, coldre et taillier;
 en bele chanbre soz cortine
 fet bon esbatre o tel meschine.”

(vss. 7081–88)

[“Calm this excessiveness, put down the shield and the lance and the hauberk that hurts you too much, and do not show your prowess. This is not your profession, but spinning, sewing, and cutting are; a young woman makes a better battle in a nice bedchamber behind the bed curtain.”]

Tarcon is making three assertions in his taunt. First, he states that war is not women’s work; second, he informs her of what is—spinning, sewing, and cutting; finally, he suggests that if Camille does want to make war, she, as a woman, should be doing it between the sheets. He is thus alternately telling her that she is unfit to be a knight, that her work is inappropriate to her sex, and that she needs to be put in her place. Moreover, he makes reference to clothing or cloth in all three of his assertions, which are emblematic of the relative social positions he is proposing. The hauberk represents the knightly class, from which women are normally excluded. The making of cloth and clothing symbolizes women who manage to become economically autonomous; these women sometimes even escape masculine control. Finally, the bed curtain evokes the traditional role of women as wives and producers of children, a type of production that very rarely assured female autonomy. Tarcon’s suggestions, then, slowly demote Camille, progressively removing her autonomy and her equal status with men. Camille, however, refuses Tarcon’s “advice,” preferring instead to kill him. She wins the battle and fights it on her own terms, as a knight in armor. And, lest there be any lingering doubts, she informs him as he dies: “mialz sai abatre un chevalier / que acoler ne dosnoier; / ne me sai pas combatre anverse” (I know better how to fight a knight than to embrace or love him; I do not know how to do battle on my back) (vss. 7123–25). Here, she is reasserting her status as a knight and, at the same time, refusing the association with the bed curtain image of femininity. She moreover refuses any essentialist reading of her womanhood, stating that what Tarcon suggests comes naturally to women, at least in her own case, does not. She is a knight, like it or not. Whereas Jaufré’s refusal to engage in the making of clothing is not a real rejection of women’s work, since he worries simply about his own incompetence, Camille’s refusal takes on a different tenor as she brandishes her

incompetence in female endeavors as though it were another sword. The meaning of the act of refusing to engage in the making of cloth varies according to the contexts. In both cases, the proposition has the meaning of provocation, and, in fact, both episodes end in battle and the death of the party who made the taunt. In Camille's case, however, the act has the additional meaning of reasserting her status as a knight, even a female one.

Despite Camille's reluctance to take on typically female work, women who had skill in working with cloth had the potential for material gains in this society. Clothing and cloth manufacture even provided some women economic autonomy from men. The negative connotations of the word *spinster* derive mainly from this society's fear of powerful women. One such example of a powerful woman is Philomena in Chrétien's Ovidian rewriting.²⁹ Philomena's ability with textiles, evoked three times in the short narrative poem, is also her saving grace. Her expertise is unmistakable: "Avuec c'iert si bone ovriere / D'ovrer une porpre vermoille / Qu'an tot le mont n'ot sa paroille. / Un diaspre ou un baudequin / Nes la mesniee Hellequin / Seüst ele an un drap portreire" (Also, she was so skilled at working red *porpre* that the whole world contained no equal. She knew how to depict in cloth—in *diaspre* or in *baudequin*—even the followers of Harlequin) (*Philomena* vss. 188–93).³⁰ This skill is not the only one that Chrétien describes: she, indeed, has many others, so many that Krueger sees in Chrétien's depiction of her a double of the writer himself ("Philomena" 94–95).³¹ However, this skill is the one that will preserve her from a dismal fate. Her brother-in-law rapes Philomena, after a lengthy discourse between the two, and afterward, he cuts out her tongue to prevent her from telling what has happened to her.³² Then, he hides her away, entrusting her to a peasant woman who, interestingly,

29. For a complete discussion of this work in the context of Chrétien's corpus, see Krueger's "Philomena."

30. Colby notes that this design not only would be a very complicated one, probably "conceived of as a band of souls in purgatory, who when driven about in the night, were visible because of the fiery envelope or phosphorescent glow surrounding their bodies," but also would seem to demand the skill of a professional weaver (136).

31. Van Vleck points to the fact that Philomena first "possesses the full power of voice. She can read, write poetry, and play several musical instruments," but that under Tereus's gaze her parole becomes impotent, and she only regains her power of testimony through her weaving abilities, which are ultimately "a medium of indictment and deposition" (35–36).

32. Krueger notes the poignancy of Philomena's loss of speech here, a loss that rivals that of her aggressor ("Philomena" 94, 97). Burns, in her "Raping Men," examines the problematic of male rape and its female response in *Philomena*. Hers is a feminist reading that questions the absoluteness of gender-based power structures in these literary works, positing instead that women react through a similar show of force and violence that has the effect of reconfiguring male-female relationships in these episodes.

supports herself through sewing and weaving. She is, according to the text, “une vilainne / Qui vivoit de sa propre painne, / Car filer et tistre savoit” (a commoner who lived by her own labor, for she knew how to spin and weave) (vss. 869–71). This self-sufficient woman unknowingly provides Philomena with the means to escape, reunite with her sister, and regain her own status. Philomena has full access to the woman’s sewing and weaving tools and supplies, and one day, she decides to weave a tapestry communicating her plight to her sister (vss. 1083–99). The old woman, who is unaware of Philomena’s motivations, procures for her whatever she needs for her task:

La vieille ne li contredist,
 Mes mout volantiers li eida
 Et trestot quanqu’ele cuida
 Qui a tel uevre covenist
 Porchacier et querre li fist.
 Trestot li quist son aparoil
 Tant que fil inde et fil vermoil
 Et jaune et vert a plante ot,
 Mes el ne conut ne ne sot
 Rien de quanque cele tissoit;
 Mes l’uevre li abelissoit
 Qui mout estoit a feire gries.

(vss. 1108–19)

[The old woman did not impede her but helped her very willingly, and she quickly sought out and found all that she thought necessary for such a task. Soon she (Philomena) asked for the loom and placed threads of indigo, red, yellow, and green on it, but she (the old woman) knew nothing about what she was weaving.]

Meanwhile, Tereus has led Procné to believe that Philomena has died. In response to this news, Procné has mourning clothes brought to her (vs. 1005). This action reflects the peasant woman’s action of supplying Procné’s sister with materials inasmuch as both actions involve specialized fabric imbued with precise meaning, brought out on Philomena’s account. Procné’s grief is furthermore so great that she swears never to remove her mourning clothes (vss. 1007–8). When the peasant woman brings her the tapestry, however, her grief ends because she learns that her sister is actually alive. In effect,

she trades one cloth for another, one state of being for another: her powerlessness before the death of her sister transforms, through the message of the tapestry, into a position of power. She is now able to save her sister and to exact a gruesome revenge upon her husband for the suffering he has inflicted upon them both.³³ Therefore, in this short narrative poem, three women are empowered through the making of cloth.³⁴

This striking example of female empowerment through the manipulation of cloth is interesting in and of itself, but when coupled with the knowledge that we have of the gift economy and the import ascribed to gifts within this society, Philomena's act takes on even more importance and meaning. She manipulates cloth in the same way that writers manipulate the vestimentary code, using cloth and its place in the gift economy insofar as these gifts establish and affirm social ties.³⁵ Her gift, then, when taken in this context, certainly creates the opportunity for her bonds with her sister to be renewed, but her gift is more than a simple reaffirmation of this relationship. She uses the cloth actually to transmit a crucial message to her sister, which must be seen as the most extensive and interesting manipulation possible of cloth. In the same way that twelfth-century writers use the vestimentary code at "face value," Philomena uses the gift to impart her desire to reestablish bonds with her sister. Yet, just as the writers use clothing signifiers to force the code into a signifying system to create new meanings in their rewriting of old sources, Philomena uses her cloth gift to forge a new meaning from the cloth that she has worked into a message. The meaning of her act of making the cloth is multiple and wide ranging—it exacts revenge, rights wrongs, and restores Philomena to her former place with her sister—but it also has the additional and perhaps more important meaning of providing a metaphor for the new process of signification in which the romance writers engage.

Chrétien provides his audience with another instance in which he represents the innovations in the process of signification, this time in his *Yvain*. In *Philomena* women gain power through the making of cloth; *Yvain* provides a counterexample to this phenomenon. Yvain comes upon a large group of

33. This scene has been analyzed in detail by Burns, who interprets Procné's murder of her own son and her cooking and serving of his flesh to his father as an answer to the violence and aggression committed by Tereus against Philomena ("Raping Men" 143–47).

34. The degree of female collaboration in this tale has not gone unremarked by critics; see especially Burns's *Bodytalk* (128–32).

35. For a discussion of the wordplay of Philomena's name, see Nancy A. Jones's "The Daughter's Text" (173).

essentially enslaved noblewomen who toil endlessly sewing clothes.³⁶ There are three hundred of these *tisseuses*, whose condition is deplorable, yet they produce clothing of great value.

de fil d'or et de soie ovoient
 chascune au mialz qu'ele savoit;
 mes tel povreté i avoit
 que desliées et desceintes
 en i ot de povreté meintes;
 et as memeles et as cotes
 estoient lor cotes derotes
 et les chemises as dos sales

(vss. 5190–97)

[They worked with golden thread and silk, each to the best of her ability; but they were of such poverty that many of them were bare headed and ungirdled because of their poverty; and at their breasts and sides their garments were torn and the *chemises* on their backs were dirty.]

The contrast between the quality of the materials they produce and the way they themselves are dressed is striking. One *tisseuse* explains their situation in some detail to Yvain when he shows concern over their treatment: “toz jorz dras de soie tistrans, / ne ja n'en serons mialz vestues; / toz jorz serons povres et nues, / et toz jorz fain et soif avrons ja tant chevir ne nos savrons / que mialz en aiens a mangier” (“We will always weave silk cloth, never will this make us better dressed; we will always be poor and naked, and always will we be hungry and thirsty. We will never be able to earn enough to afford better food”) (vss. 5292–95). Clearly, these women have been denied the economic fruits of their labor.³⁷ Whereas sewing, spinning, and weaving

36. Krueger points out that Chrétien's hyperrealistic portrayal of the oppression and abjection of the *tisseuses* contrasts directly with the image superimposed upon it at the same castle of the young damsel sitting on the rug, reading with her parents, who will be awarded as a prize to the knight who vanquishes the two *filz de netun*; although the text offers two distinctly different images of women, some enslaved, one courtly and desirable, both images inscribe the female into the patriarchal structure of the society of the twelfth century (*Women Readers* 46–47).

37. Gérard Brault argues against interpreting the *tisseuses* episode as a realistic element of the romance that offers a condemnation of supposed working conditions of the period, as has been argued by some critics, in favor of reading it rather in terms of the conflict between the two sisters over their inheritance that encompasses the episode: “L'épisode . . . oppose le vice de l'aînée à la

normally would provide at least some economic stability and self-sufficiency for women, these *tisseuses* live a life of abject poverty while the males for whom they work reap the benefits.

Mes bien sachiez vos a estros
 que il n'i a celi de nos
 qui ne gaaint cinc solz ou plus.
 De ce seroit riches uns dus!
 Et nos somes ci an poverte,
 s'est riches de nostre desserte
 cil por cui nos nos traveillons.

(vss. 5307–13)

[But, know this well, there is not one of us who does not do the work to earn five sous or more. With this sum, even a duke would be rich! And we are in poverty, he is rich through our product, the one for whom we work ourselves.]

The situation of these poor ladies is a notable irony in the romance, for their work provides to others what they themselves are denied. Their vocation should, but does not, grant them some hope for an improved economic situation: they have a valued skill. But rather than elevate them in this way, their work simply accentuates their lack. The tattered state of their clothing, moreover, borders on nudity, and this near nudity represents their powerlessness, vulnerability, and lack of social status. Yvain is, in fact, in the process of atoning for his own devaluing of a woman—his failure to keep his promise to Laudine—and he is sensitive to the plight of these women perhaps because of his prior mistake and his fall into nudity and outcast status. The interest that he takes in these women and his ultimate liberation of them helps Yvain along his redemptive path. He understands that despite their truly valuable work, they themselves remain unjustly devalued and economically disadvantaged. Thus, in this episode, Chrétien distorts the earning potential of producing textiles, transforming it instead into a cruel irony. Moreover, Chrétien depicts noblewomen engaged in mercantile activity within the profit economy. This image is shocking for the noble audience, since the nobility of the twelfth century considered such engagements to

vertu de la cadette, fait ressortir la force de la coutume, et souligne la justesse de la décision prise par Arthur" (64).

be ignoble. All the characters vilify the forced mercantile activity of these ladies even more than their captivity, and the narrator himself acknowledges the injustice. Fortunately for the young ladies, the situation is rectified by the hero. Ultimately, what originates as a subversion not only of the vestimentary code, for the ladies are dressed in rags, but also of the notion of nobility—the women are engaged in manual and for-profit labor—becomes reinscribed into the signifying system. Their act has meaning if for no other reason than it gives Yvain the opportunity to liberate them, but it has, as does Philomena's act, the additional meaning of providing a model of the code manipulations that become inscribed into the signifying system by the writers of romance. In the same way that the code becomes subsumed in the signifying system, the acts of the *tisseuses* become subsumed.

The converse of making clothing, the act of destroying garments, tends to occur in one of two situations: either a distraught person destroys his or her own clothing to indicate grief, or a person destroys another person's clothing in an act of violence. The first case is a well-documented social behavior and manifests in texts to communicate a character's state of being. There are many examples of this behavior in the literature of the period, but a few will suffice to illustrate my point: Laudine is mourning the death of her fountain-protector when we first see her, ripping and tearing her clothes (*Yvain* vs. 1159); in *Erec et Enide*, Enide has a similar reaction when she believes Erec to be dead (vss. 4576–78). In these cases, grief is made material through the rending of clothing: the inner reality of a character is textually rendered through the depiction of his or her destructive outward actions. The second category appears just as, if not more, frequently than the first type and is an act of aggression. Two examples will suffice to make this point clear. In *Jaufre*, a leper is attempting to rape a maiden, who wails for aid and whom Jaufré subsequently rescues. The leper has ripped her clothing, exposing her breasts in a scene of violence: “E fu sa gonela esquintada / Tro aval desos la tetina” (Her dress was ripped to down below her breasts) (vss. 2304–5). Moreover, the text makes mention of this scene twice more, once around 300 lines later and then around 650 lines after the first evocation of the scene. The author seems to be insisting not only upon the inappropriateness of the act but also upon its violence. In Marie's *Guigemar*, Mériaduc attempts to untie the *ceinture* that the lovers have devised to protect themselves from being loved by anyone else. He is doomed to fail, however, since he is not the lady's love and, more important, because he attempts to release her from the knot, the love token, by force. His effort is characterized by anger and violence, for he prefaces his

action with a statement given “par maltalent” (with evil intention) (vs. 726) and then “de sun bliaut trenche le laz” (cuts open the laces of her *bliaut*) (vs. 738). His action is thus done with ill will and aggression and damages her clothing in process. Both these examples fall squarely and unproblematically within the vestimentary code, but just as gifts, dressing and undressing acts, and acts of making clothing at times resist codified meanings, there are acts of destroying clothing that provide evidence of the emerging signifying system. One such case occurs in Chrétien’s *Lancelot*, and the vestimentary richness of the scene deserves special note.

In this romance Chrétien constructs a scene in which vestimentary violence is false and actually provokes a great deal more clothing action—the scene of the false rape. In a single scene, characters dress and undress themselves and each other, or refuse to do so; give clothing gifts; and destroy clothing, all to varying degrees and for different purposes. The result is extremely rich vestimentary imagery that develops the character of Lancelot considerably. At the castle of the lady whose lodging is dependent upon his sleeping with her, the lady dresses him, as is customary, in a fur mantle; however, during the false rape scene one of the lady’s assailants tears the mantle (vs. 1145). We may initially consider this act of specialized undressing to be one of aggression and dishonoring, yet since the assailant does not destroy the mantle, only tears it a bit, we come to understand that Chrétien is showing us that this act of tearing is quite carefully controlled and that ultimately the violence is only temporary and slight. Indeed, it is false and thus mirrors perfectly the acts of the assailant toward the lady. When Lancelot first enters into the false rape scene, the poet explains that the lady is nude to the navel (vs. 1082). Again, the fact that her nudity is partial signals that the rape is not a real one: all is for show. What is real, however, is Lancelot’s prowess and chivalric merit, as he comes to the aid of the maiden. The defense that he mounts on her behalf, as well as the courtly way in which he behaves toward her as she offers her body to him later that evening, lead her to the realization that this knight is indeed exceptional and worthy (vss. 1270–78).

The scene between Lancelot and the maiden is particularly interesting with regard to the use of vestimentary imagery. The bed to which the maiden leads Lancelot for their night together is covered in perfectly white sheets (vss. 1195–99), evoking an impression of purity. This image both defies the lady’s amorous attempts and reinforces their ultimate failure, for Lancelot rejects her advances. Lancelot, however, reveals his lack of interest in sleeping with her only after the two have got into bed together. What is remarkable in this passage is the care with which Chrétien points out that

neither Lancelot nor the maiden has removed his or her *chemise* (vss. 1201–3; 1213–15). Just as the earlier dishonoring was a false one, so this intimacy is equally false. Upon making this discovery, the lady excuses herself, undresses herself in her own chamber, and remarks that Lancelot is a truly worthy knight. The lady's undressing herself, like the white bedsheets, contrasts and answers both the rape scene, in which the wrong person attempts to undress her, and Lancelot's rejection, in which the right person refuses to undress her. Lancelot implicitly honors her by leaving her clothed, while the rapist, albeit a false one, dishonors her: Lancelot's honoring answers the prior dishonoring. The lady's undressing herself signals her deference toward Lancelot and her esteem for him, even though he is absent from this honoring act. The very next view that both the lady and we, as readers, have of Lancelot is as a fully armed knight, ready to continue his quest of the queen:

Isnelemant et tost se lieve.
 Et li chevaliers se resvoille,
 si s'atorne et si s'aparoille
 et s'arme, que nelui n'atant.
 La dameisele vient a tant,
 si voit qu'il est ja atornez.

(vss. 1282–87)

[Quickly and early she rose. The knight awoke and dressed; with no help from anyone, he prepared himself and armed himself. At this moment the young lady arrived and saw that he was already attired.]

This image of Lancelot is certainly the only aspect of this episode that unequivocally rings true: the lady has honored him only to provoke his assistance during the staged rape in which both she then he are falsely dishonored, and she has attempted to force him into a false intimacy by insisting that the only way that she will allow him to be lodged in her castle is if he sleeps with her. This attempt at intimacy is foiled, however, by the worthiness of the knight. The image of Lancelot armed and ready to face the only *aventure* that matters to him (recovering the queen from her captor) is, in fact, the only aspect of the episode in which appearance corresponds to reality.

Whereas the acts of making clothing or cloth figuratively represent the process of using the vestimentary code to create a new signifying system,

the act of destroying clothes, whether partially or completely, demonstrates a similar but slightly different metaphor. Paradoxically, the very fact of the destroyed or degraded clothing signifier attests to the strength of the system, for in general rent clothing is subsequently reinscribed into the system and continues to generate meanings. In the example from *Lancelot*, once again, the author pushes the code to the limit by presenting false and manipulated vestimentary imagery and then requires his audience to interpret the clothing acts in a different context, with different meanings. He thus forces the code to transcend itself and emerge as a signifying system in which meaning is contingent upon context and the potential for the creation of new meanings is ever present and often realized. As do his characters, Chrétien destroys the absoluteness of the code, destroying order with it, and then allows it to reemerge reconstituted as a more complex system, creating a new order that accounts for ambiguity, ambivalence, and arbitrariness.

The chapter concludes with this last example because it clearly demonstrates to what extent clothing acts may function in a highly developed signifying system. The scene discussed contains many different types of clothing acts, all of which must be interpreted in their specific contexts. These acts, like many of the clothing acts in this literary corpus, signify rather than symbolize. They participate in a system whose rules are starting to show evidence of slippage. Mirroring the larger societal shift in which the nobles were increasingly in commerce with merchants, this reshaping marks the beginning of a new horizontal organization of representation, one in which meaning derives, not from divine or princely ordinance, but rather from relations between words and concepts. The sign, in mentality and in literary practice, is emerging. However, just as the merchants continue to live alongside the nobles, these clothing signs continue to coexist with their symbolic counterparts; in fact, many clothing acts remain whose purposes and functions, narrative and extratextual, continue to align perfectly with one another. Indeed, the vestimentary code is subsumed by the signifying system; however, the possibility of manipulating it is preserved even as it is subsumed, resulting in a remarkably dynamic system in which signifiers have meanings contingent upon context. Accordingly, a great many clothing acts provide striking evidence of the emerging signifying system, insofar as these acts have purposes and meanings that are fully understandable only in relation to their specific contexts. The clothing signifying system is therefore imbued with the ambiguity and ambivalence of the age.

