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Weaving Narrative

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CONCLUSION



THAT THE TEXTUAL FEATURES OF ROMANCE include a great many textile elements is clear. The medieval art of composition, or *conjointure*, is primarily a technique of weaving a narrative, both from a methodological perspective and from an aesthetic perspective, since writers sought to choose among many possible elements those that would please and regale their audience. The clothing signifying system, as part of *conjointure*, is likewise a major component of romance at many different narrative levels, and the principal reason for its use must be traced to the importance placed on the vestimentary code and appearance by its noble audience. The shifting concerns of this class are indicative of and cause for changing perspectives, changing mentalities. Representation is in the process of moving from a fixed, static state, a symbolic state, toward a freer, more dynamic expressive system exemplified by the sign. One of the mechanisms that writers use to portray this changing world is the complex clothing signifying system that they fashion from the vestimentary code and exploit to its fullest representational potential.

The shift in representation perhaps begins with a change in the art of description and involves a movement away from the established, codified, and static “types” of character description, which consistently includes clothing description, toward more complicated, even problematic descriptions that inscribe ambivalence into both the characterization and the text. Such ambivalence takes different forms: sexual, gender, class, and economic or material ambivalence. The resulting descriptions are dynamic and help elaborate character identity, whether social or personal. This dynamism extends into the very material nature of clothing: its capacity to conceal as much as it reveals. Disguise is a kind of normalized subversion of the vestimentary code that, in fact, undermines it both because it occurs frequently and almost always successfully in courtly literature, and because it represents a dramatic subversion of the identity that clothing helps elaborate. This potential for subversion within the code actually provides a point of entry for more widespread manipulation of it. The writers exploit this feature of the code whenever it suits their narrative needs to do so.

Moreover, they also manipulate the vestimentary code in much more fundamental ways, with great impact on it as well as on the process of signification. The variety of different types of manipulation may be seen along a continuum, progressing from the least invasive to the most dramatic. First, writers may choose to duplicate the code but give it different conventions, a process that incurs changes only at the level of the signifier. Such changes involve the use of a parallel semiotic system in which different meanings are arbitrarily assigned to a signifier, as in the case of Tristan's ring, which unequivocally identifies him to Yseut but only to her, the ring having no special meaning for any other character.

Second, writers may decide to alter the process of signification through changes either in the linguistic community or in the context in which clothing references appear. Community-based meanings for signifiers involve those instances in which only certain members of a linguistic community are capable of deciphering the meaning of a signifier, as in the case in *Guillaume d'Angleterre* when the pieces of cloth cut from the king's coat identify the two youths as Guillaume's sons but only to Guillaume himself. Guillaume is the only member of that linguistic community for whom the pieces of cloth have their real and true meaning. Changes to context, by contrast, may occur at several interrelated levels: character, theme, plot, or narrative. All these levels provide contexts that may effect the meaning of a single clothing signifier. In other words, a clothing act may have a different meaning when viewed in light of character motivation than the meaning it has when viewed in light of plot motivation or in narrative context. For example, when Jocasta and her daughters dress themselves well and beautifully to go before Polyneices to entreat him to end the war with his brother, their attempt fails, but their action instead enhances Antigone's beauty and precipitates Parthenopeus's falling in love with her, resulting in a symmetry in the narrative. In this case, the apparent failure of the act in the context of character motivation is countered by its significance with regard to the action it provokes and the ensuing narrative symmetry in the work. Thus the act's deeper meaning may be determined only in light of these additional contexts.

Finally, there exists the possibility of code absence. These are situations in which clothing signifiers are otherwise completely indecipherable or confused, as when Lancelot wears different armor to the tournament, but continue to have meaning for another character who reads beyond the signifier, as does Guenevere when she recognizes her lover despite his unknown armor. Although this last position on the continuum of manipulation is

certainly the most extreme and most dramatic, all manipulations of the vestimentary code actually help transform it. Taken together, their effect on it is, in fact, so significant that it transcends its own conventions of a strict and single connection between form and meaning. The code thus becomes a true signifying system with the potential, most often realized in these courtly works, to create rather than simply reiterate predetermined, fixed meanings.

Whereas, with the emergence of the clothing signifying system, clothing descriptions become increasingly dynamic, clothing acts, by their very nature as alterations of appearance, provide perhaps the most compelling examples of this dynamism. Even the most normative acts, the giving of clothing in the context of a gift economy, potentially change characters' identities, social and sometimes personal, and attest to an increasing fluidity within the code. Moreover, there are instances in which gifts possess a surplus of meaning that derives from their occurrence in several different layers of context at once and that often defy the conventions of gift-giving as they are inscribed in the gift economy. The changing relationship of form to meaning, reflected in the transition from symbol to sign occurring in the larger representational system, as discussed earlier, is perhaps the most salient characteristic of the developing clothing signifying system. In this system, not only must descriptions and acts be interpreted rather than simply read as unproblematic symbols, but they may also have multiple and varying meanings depending upon the context or narrative level in which they are considered. In other words, a single clothing act may have several different but complementary meanings when viewed from different perspectives. The writer of romance, then, pushes the codified connection between signifier and signified to its limits and often beyond them to create new meanings for established clothing referents and even to create, through the total inversion of convention, new forms for preexisting ideas.

The depiction of making cloth or clothing gives writers the occasion to represent the very process in which they are engaged: a fashioning of materials into meanings, a fashioning of a code into a signifying system. These processes involve the transference of meaning through established clothing norms but are not limited to the narrowness of the codified, symbolic relationship between form and meaning. Rather, in both the process of cloth(es)-making and that of making a signifying system, signifiers may be imbued with additional, unconventional, and often very specific and peculiar meanings, and the interplay between signifier and signified itself may take on provocative new meanings as well. The increased capacity for

signification and flexibility that accompanies the metaphoric inscription of the writer's process onto the represented universe allows further opportunities for the integration of additional ambivalence into the text. Certainly Chrétien's depiction of the noble yet degraded *tisseuses* both distorts the normative practices of clothes-making and subsequently resolves the tension and even shock that such an image provokes, while nonetheless inscribing a degree of economic and class ambiguity despite the restoration at the end of the episode. Chrétien portrays the subversion of the ladies' nobility through their forced economic activity and their lamentable state and then repairs it through Yvain's liberation of them, but the damage has been done to the code's conventions, forcing it to accommodate increased flexibility and less static expression. The vestimentary code at its most creative, that is, the codified behavior and meaning of making clothes, thus becomes, in romance, a self-reflexive and highly interpretive vehicle to depict the craft of the writers.

Significantly, the representation of the destruction of clothing does not evoke or equate with the destruction of the code but instead the destruction of its absoluteness. An extraordinary illustration of this phenomenon occurs in Chrétien's *Lancelot* during the complex scene of the false rape in which the partial destruction of the lady's clothing cannot fundamentally mean what it might in other circumstances—dishonoring her—but instead has the opposing and misplaced effect of further honoring Lancelot, all the while powerfully reasserting the theme that honoring and dishonoring are inverted in this romance. But just as the *tisseuses* scene in *Yvain* inscribes ambivalence into the code, so this inverted dishonorable destruction imbues both ambiguity and arbitrariness into it. Moreover, just as the destruction of the lady's garment was partial and ultimately not dishonoring, so too this transgression of convention does not, in fact, destroy the code but instead assists in its expansion. Indeed, just as destroyed or compromised clothing is also reinscribed into the system, the vestimentary code itself is subsumed by the signifying system. Destruction of clothing, then, may in essence be as creative a process as the making of clothing.

The dynamism of the clothing signifying system does not occur merely at the level of the signifier, the image, or the act but touches all levels of the narrative, sometimes even producing a parallel vestimentary narrative to be read through the clothing references of a text. The structure of a work, along with all the thematic and narrative elements that produce it, is therefore imbued with this dynamism. Clothing instances often form cycles or narrative threads that sometimes elaborate and reinforce the major

themes of a work, sometimes motivate the plot through the precipitation of further actions. Such instances are important structuring devices for the romance, frequently providing structure through analogical composition, whether formal or thematic analogy. Thematic elaboration, intricately related to structure in the courtly literature of the twelfth century, is also well served by the use of the clothing signifying system. In much the same way that writers of romance use clothing to elucidate character, they often have recourse to vestimentary imagery and the depiction of clothing acts to develop thematic content across large expanses of text in order to link various and otherwise unconnected episodes to one another. This type of textual coherence derives not from formal unity but from thematic relatedness and is emblematic of the romance genre of this period. It is precisely this kind of structure that gives form and meaning to complex textile works such as tapestry, as Vinaver noted (*Form* 10).

In romance, text and textile are, in fact, indissociable. Indeed, the relationship between the two is not simply metaphorical but rather actually describes the relationship between the thematic and the formal, between the actions of the characters within the text and the process of composition in which the writers engage to create the text. The vestimentary signifying system, with its contingent meanings that are dependent upon context and its signifier whose relationship to adjacent signifiers is fluid, could easily be compared to the fibers of cloth, bound and twisted together, woven into new forms, dyed with the color of specific meanings, and made into the fabric of fiction. The manipulation of this fabric, both a manual and a material act, produces ever changing, ever dynamic surfaces. These surfaces form an impression that, like the very weave of cloth, both reveals and conceals its own threads, its own wearer, and its own constituents at different points and in different ways. Romance, with its propensity for detailed descriptions of and many acts involving clothing, is a more dynamic genre as a whole for having dressed itself in the changing fabric of the society in which it was generated, revealing itself, concealing itself, and playing with the system until that system becomes material in the text, material in the world. The art of romance, Chrétien's *molt bele conjointure*, is an art of weaving, and the clothing signifying system that the practitioners of this art created is a crucial and beautiful feature of that weave.

