

MEDIOEVO ROMANZO

RIVISTA QUADRIMESTRALE

DIRETTA DA D'ARCO S. AVALLE, FRANCESCO BRANCIFORTI, GIANFRANCO
FOLENA, FRANCESCO SABATINI, CESARE SEGRE, ALBERTO VARVARO

VOLUME IX · 1984

SOCIETA EDITRICE IL MULINO BOLOGNA

Description in Medieval Narrative: Vestimentary Coherence in Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*

Widely cited formulations of medieval vernacular descriptive practice call attention to what might be called its *auto-referential* nature — its reliance on the descriptive conventions of literary discourse. Insisting that «medieval descriptions of nature are not meant to represent reality», E. R. Curtius attributes the exotic flora and fauna of northern medieval landscape descriptions to the classical influence of rhetorical school exercises inherited from late antiquity¹. Likewise, Roland Barthes cites a total lack of descriptive 'realism' throughout the Middle Ages, maintaining that verisimilitude is not referential but rather the result of generic constraints. With reference to the taste for *ekphrasis* originating in Alexandrian neo-rhetoric, Barthes postulates the subsequent continuity of an «esthetic finality of language» in medieval descriptive practice². It has been suggested that this characteristic would in fact distinguish description in medieval narrative from that found in modern fiction. Gérard Genette, for example, depicts the role of descriptive detail in early narrative as «decorative» and «purely esthetic» rather than «explicative», achieving the latter status only with the realist novel of the nineteenth century³.

A variety of factors may be adduced to account for the apparent pre-eminence of an auto-referential mode in medieval narrative description, particularly the teaching in the milieu of the

¹ Ernest Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, New York 1963², p. 183f. This was generally true of both *descriptio rerum* and *personae*. See Paul Zumthor, *Langue, texte, énigme*, Paris 1973, p. 102.

² Roland Barthes, «L'effet de réel», *Communications* 11 (1968): 85f: «La description n'est pas assujétie à aucun réalisme; peu importe sa vérité (ou même sa vraisemblance); il n'y a aucune gêne à placer des lions ou des oliviers dans un paysage nordique; seul compte la contrainte du genre descriptif; le vraisemblable n'est pas ici référentiel, mais ouvertement discursif: ce sont les règles génériques du discours qui font la loi».

³ Gérard Genette, *Figures II*, Paris 1969, p. 58f. Paul Zumthor finds description in medieval romance to be «décorative, surtout, mais aussi, et de plus en plus au XIII^e siècle, 'explicative' par le truchement des emblèmes». See *Essai de poésie médiévale*, Paris 1972, p. 353f.

ecclesiastical schools of formulae stemming from antiquity and codified in the *artes dictaminis*⁴. It has long been acknowledged, however, that the esthetic priority of the auto-referential mode in medieval description is readily complemented by deliberate implementations of an *inferential mode*, that is, a mode which orientates the reader toward abstract intellectualized conceptions of a moral, metaphysical, or philosophical order. The close alliance of the two descriptive modes is explicitly set forth in Latin commentaries that depict referential descriptive elements as the *involucra* or *integumenta* of covert theological or philosophical ideas⁵. Even more systematic are the methodologies of scriptural exegetes, for whom the entire Universe is conceived as a vast allegorical model in which every object is meaningful in an interpretative hierarchy⁶.

With regard to medieval vernacular texts the question of descriptive inferentiality has often been approached from aprioristic assumptions that exegetical methods elaborated in patristic commentaries on the multiple senses of Scripture are pertinent to vernacular works, or that the 'medieval mind' was somehow endowed with a capacity to intuit the symbolic meaning of objects and events. Consequently, much has been written about localized symbolism of descriptive detail on the basis of biblical typology, the multiplicity of exegetical senses, number and color symbolism, etc.⁷ Challengers of these approaches, however, have adduced evidence that with the exception of a few romances where theological interpretations are made explicit, such as the Vulgate *Queste del saint graal*, or in such works as the *Ovide moralisé*, vernacular texts were generally excluded from the type of interpretation applied to Scripture and that there was no systematic context of symbolism within which romance was understood⁸.

⁴ See Zumthor, *Essai*, pp. 50, 353f., and *Langue, texte, énigme*, p. 98f.

⁵ See E. Jauneau, «L'Usage de la notion d'*integumentum* à travers les gloses de Guillaume de Conches», *AHDLMA* 24 (1958): 35-100; Winthrop Wetherbee, *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century: The Literary Influence of the School of Chartres*, Princeton 1972, p. 42f.; and Brian Stock, *Myth and Science in the Twelfth Century: A Study of Bernard Sylvester*, Princeton 1972, p. 33f.

⁶ See H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale. Les quatre sens de l'écriture*, Paris 1959-64.

⁷ Two seminal views appear in Reto R. Bezzola, *Le Sens de l'aventure et de l'amour (Chrétien de Troyes)*, Paris 1947, and in D. W. Robertson, jr., *A Preface to Chaucer*, Princeton 1962.

⁸ See especially Morton W. Bloomfield, «Symbolism in Medieval Literature», *MP* 61 (1958): 73-81; Robert Guette, «Symbolisme et 'Senefiance' au Moyen Age»,

It is nonetheless apparent that concepts of narrative organization in which all details are meaningfully assimilated to a fundamental instructive dimension were to some extent influential in the theory and practice of vernacular writers. Although with less allegorical rigor than in the writings of the scriptural exegetes, the prologues of Old French narrative romances of the 12th century emphasize a work's inferentiality by referring to its *san*, which is in turn contingent upon the poet's adherence to preconceived standards of discursive organization⁹. While some critics insist that much description in medieval romance reflects primarily the writer's fascination with exotic elements of classical description or a desire to display a superior mastery of ornamental rhetoric independent of any concern with an instructive dimension, the close association of esthetic and instructive criteria in these exordial statements suggests that isolated descriptive details may in some instances be systematically recuperated within a broader inferential scheme.

To explore this assumption on a limited basis we offer the following analysis of a set of descriptive features in Chrétien de Troyes' first Arthurian romance, *Erec et Enide*, a particularly pertinent text because its widely acknowledged high frequency of descriptive passages has been repeatedly attributed to the poet's virtuosity in response to the contemporary courtly taste for sumptuous and exotic detail¹⁰. Taken in isolation, numerous rhetorical figures in Chrétien's early descriptive style might in fact seem to function as gratuitous ornamental devices¹¹. Yet in

in *Questions de Littérature*, Gand 1960, pp. 33-60; Jean Misrahi, «Symbolism and Allegory in Arthurian Romance», *RPh* 17 (1964): 555-69; Francis Lee Utley, «Robertsonianism Redivivus», *RPh* 19 (1965): 250-60.

⁹ The prologue to the *Lais* of Marie de France and that of Chrétien's *Chevalier à la charrette* provide important contexts for the term *san*. For critical discussion, see Karl D. Uitti, *Story, Myth, and Celebration in Old French Narrative Poetry, 1050-1200*, Princeton 1973, p. 135f.; Marie-Louise Ollier, «The Author in the Text: The Prologues of Chrétien de Troyes», *YFS* 51 (1974): 26-41.

¹⁰ Exceptions are Jean Györy's discussion of a «complexe vestimentaire» in this romance, restricted almost entirely to the theme of economic degradation: «Prolégomènes à une imagerie de Chrétien de Troyes», *CCM* 10 (1967): 371-74; and Claude Luttrell, *The Creation of the First Arthurian Romance: A Quest*, Evanston 1974, p. 47: «With both hero and heroine there is a symbolism inherent in dress».

¹¹ See especially Valeria Bertolucci, «Commento retorico all'*Erec* e al *Cliges*», *SMV* 8 (1960): 9-51, who points to a change «in adesione ad una particolare corrente del gusto, che prevale in *Cliges*, su quella rispecchiantesi in *Erec* e contrassegnata dal largo indiscriminato uso della descrizione» (p. 35).

the prologue to *Erec* (vv. 1-26), the avowed aim to «bien dire et bien apprendre» appears to valorize ornamental criteria to the extent that they conform both to an instructive objective and to an orderly disposition and linking of narrative sequences («une molt bele conjointure») ¹², compelling the reader to adopt a comprehensive view of esthetic and ethical elements in the romance. Indeed, it is from an integrative perspective ¹³ that we begin to see how certain of these discrete ornamental details tend to be assimilated to an iterative structure organized around coherent descriptive sets ¹⁴. In the following sections we shall examine how the descriptions of chivalric arms and feminine attire are related through successive functions, notably that of departure ¹⁵, so as to constitute a level of coherence based on iterative sets of vestimentary detail. We shall see how this vestimentary code serves to activate perception of the relation between descriptions of arms and dress and other levels of coherence in the text.

A. First Departure: «Li premiers vers» (vv. 27-1796) ¹⁶.

The prominence of vestimentary detail is established from the outset of the story in the account of Erec's initial separation from Arthur's court and his undertaking of the Contest of the Sparrow Hawk in Laluth. When he joins the Queen and her maiden in their ride through the forest instead of participating in the *coutume* of the White Stag with which the romance opens, he is elegantly attired as a courtier in an ornate silk tunic, fur-

¹² See Douglas Kelly, «The Source and Meaning of *conjointure* in Chrétien's *Erec* 14», *Viator* 1 (1970): 179-200.

¹³ «Integration» is used here in the sense proposed by Barthes in relation to the «hierarchy of levels or strata» of which narrative is composed; see «Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative», *NLH* 6 (1971): 237-72.

¹⁴ Such is the case, for example, in the major convocations of the Arthurian court, of which each surpasses its predecessor in magnitude. The concurrence of these convocations with three major feast days of the liturgical year (Easter, Pentecost, Christmas) provides a further inferential dimension, implying that the rituals of the court are semically related to religious archetypes.

¹⁵ A. R. Press suggests that the detail of more than one departure scene constitutes «une petite démonstration», in which Erec finds «un moyen de faire apparaître sous une forme visible à tous un phénomène abstrait et complexe de sa vie affective»; see «Le comportement d'Erec envers Enide dans le roman de Chrétien de Troyes», *Romania* 90 (1969): 532.

¹⁶ All citations of passages of *Erec et Enide* are from the edition by Mario Roques in CFMA, Paris 1963.

lined cloak, silk brocade hose, and golden spurs (vv. 81-104)¹⁷. His participation in the following *aventure* of the Sparrow Hawk Contest is determined by the fact that he is not fully armed: «n'ot avoec lui arme aportee | fors que tant seulement s'espee» (vv. 103-4). When an unknown knight and maiden encountered in the forest do not answer Guenievre's courtly greeting and when the dwarf accompanying the couple strikes the Queen's maiden and then Erec himself, Erec can react neither to the dwarf's abuse nor to the unspoken threat of the armed knight because he is not armed for combat, as he declares: «mes nus nel me doit reprochier, | que je toz desarmez estoie» (vv. 238-9). He nonetheless sets out immediately in pursuit, and is obliged to borrow arms in the strange city to which he follows them. As a result, the initial demonstration of his chivalric merit takes place in the absence of the traditional accoutrements of his rank and status¹⁸.

These circumstances prepare a subtle parallel between the initial situation of Erec and that of Enide. The young maiden's qualities, like those of the vavassor who is her father and donor of the hero's arms, are immediately recognized by Erec despite the apparently humble circumstances of the family. When Erec learns of the conditions of the Sparrow Hawk Contest, that he needs a lady of surpassing beauty and merit in order to challenge the arrogant knight whom he has followed, he does not hesitate to champion Enide. She is noble despite her family's poverty; her beauty reveals itself despite her threadbare dress¹⁹. After their eventual victory, he insists that Enide accompany him to

¹⁷ For extended analysis of Erec's initial appearance in this romance, see Donald Maddox, *Structure and Sacring: The Systematic Kingdom in Chrétien's Erec et Enide*, Lexington 1978, pp. 73-143.

¹⁸ It is typical of the poet's subtle insistence on the contrast that Erec phrases to his host his own indifference to the appearance of the arms that he needs in order to challenge Yder, which may be «viez ou noveles, | ne me chaut quieux, leides ou beles» (vv. 609-10).

¹⁹ For a stylistic analysis of the long initial portrait of Enide, see A. Colby, *The Portrait in Twelfth-Century French Literature*, Genève 1975, pp. 138-44. B. N. Sargent, in a study «Belle Enide, bonne Enide», *Mélanges Le Gentil*, Paris 1973, pp. 767-71, identifies as a major element in the work the two camps into which characters may be divided on the basis of their views of Enide: those who see only her exterior, and those who recognize beneath it her «extraordinaire beauté d'âme»; Sargent, however, counts Erec among the former until the crisis occasioned by Enide's *parole*, while the present analysis suggests that his initial union with Enide is based upon a perception of her merit as well as her beauty.

Arthur's court in her shabby attire rather than accept her maternal uncle's offer of an elegant dress (vv. 1349-50). Erec's insistence that only the Queen may furnish Enide's attire implies that he wishes Enide's destiny to reign at his side to be sanctioned by the regal gown of a reigning sovereign (cf. vv. 684-90; 1534-61). Dressed in a gown and mantle tailored expressly for Guenievre herself, Enide is the perfect harmonization of unadorned beauty, given her by Nature, her creator (vv. 411-41), and the synecdochic vestimentary beauty provided by the Queen, her benefactor and sponsor²⁰.

B. *Second Departure: From Carnant «en aventure».*

Her innate merit confirmed in the symbolic attributes of royal status, Enide is universally acknowledged as *la plus bele*, and harmony is restored to Arthur's court as she is awarded the kiss which concludes the White Stag Custom. Her marriage to Erec follows, and the couple's subsequent location in Carnant, the court of Erec's father, would seem to assure the stability of their apparently exemplary union. Nonetheless the intimations of public disapproval which Erec overhears one day in his wife's lament leads to their setting out again, *en aventure*. Throughout «*Li premiers vers*», the significance of descriptions of arms and dress was restricted to specific episodes where they remained locally emblematic. In the scene of the couple's departure from Carnant, however, we recognize the first evidence that certain elements of earlier descriptions of arming and dressing are recurrent and that they may be recuperated by a vestimentary code. The invariant properties of this code are established by the redundant descriptive elements that create a paradigmatic relation between this scene and previous episodes. When Erec orders Enide to don «*vostre robe la plus bele*» and saddle «*vostre meilleur palefroi*» (vv. 2576-8), for example, the earlier vestimentary image of Enide as the honoree of the White Stag Custom is evoked.

²⁰ In Peter Haidu's phrase, Guenievre's gown represents a «promotion sociale», a gift conveying the approbation of the Arthurian court which functions as social arbiter; see *Lion-Queue-coupée: L'écart symbolique chez Chrétien de Troyes*, Genève 1972, p. 20. E. Mickel remarks that «one has the impression that Enide's unanimous acceptance as the lady to receive the kiss is the result of her inner qualities, a spiritual superiority unrivalled by the numerous beautiful ladies at court»; see «A Reconsideration of Chrétien's *Erec*», *RF* 84 (1972): p. 36.

Likewise the arming of Erec shares an important iterative set with the description of his initial arming at Laluth:

Arming of Erec at Laluth

lace li les *chaucés de fer*
et queust a corroie de cer;
hauberc li vest de *boene maille*
et se li lace la vantaille;

li *hiaume brun* li met el chief,
molt l'arme bien de chief en chief.

Au costé *l'espee* li ceint.
Puis comande qu'an li amaint
son cheval, et l'an li amainne...

(vv. 711-9)

Arming of Erec at Carnant

premieremant se fist lacier
unes chaucés de blanc acier,
un *hauberc* vest après tant chier
qu'an n'an puet *maille detrenchier*;
molt estoit *riches* li haubers
que an l'androit ne an l'anvers
n'ot tant de fer com une aguille,
n'onques n'i pot coillir reoille,
que toz estoit *d'argent feitiz*,
de meniës mailles tresliz;
si ert ovrez si soutilmant
dire vos puis seüremant
que ja nus qui vestu l'eüst
plus las ne plus doillanz n'an fust
ne que s'eüst sor sa chemise
une cote de soie mise.
Li sergent et li chevalier
se prenent tuit a merveiller
por coi il se fesoit armer,
mes nus ne l'ose demander.
Quant del hauberc l'orent armé,
un *hiaume a cercle d'or jamé*,
qui plus cler reluisoit que glace,
uns vaslez sor le chief li lace;
si prent *l'espee*, si la ceint.
Lors comanda qu'an li amaint
le bai de Gascoigne anselé...

(vv. 2633-59)

Our italics show that each passage describes the same items in the same order, but the second passage suggests arms whose superior quality and value surpass the mere utility of those in the first set, while the saddled Gascon bay contrasts with the nondescript horse at the end of the earlier passage²¹.

²¹ Jean Frappier calls the rust-proof hauberk «le témoin... d'une civilisation brillante et raffinée où luxe et euphorie ont trouvé un accord sans défaut (qui parmi les auteurs de chansons de geste aurait pensé à comparer un haubert à une cote de soie?)... Sa splendeur matérielle et son éclat... s'enrichissent d'une signification morale et, de ce fait, il est l'image du chevalier parfait qu'Erec devrait être ou qu'il n'est plus, depuis que la récréantise a terni sa gloire»; in «Pour le commentaire d'Erec et Enide», *MRom* 20 (1970): 29-30.

The recurrent elements of the descriptive field in these two passages prompt us to revert to the circumstances of the couple's earlier departure from Laluth as an interpretative measure of their later departure from Carnant. At both junctures, arming and dress are the invariant categories, yet significant transformations of detail appear in the second scene. Erec's command that the couple clothe themselves for departure in separate chambers reveals the husband's angry reaction to the news of his declining chivalric reputation, but it also recalls the couple's first meeting. At that time, it was emphasized that «la pucele meïsmes l'arme» (v. 709)²², and on subsequent occasions, Enide's participation or non-participation in Erec's arming serves as an index of her relation to her husband. At Carnant, her absence from the ceremonious arming of Erec is emphasized by understatement in the terse indication that for assistance «Erec un autre apela» (v. 2620). Once attired, Erec in splendid new armor and Enide in her finest gown, the couple contrast vividly with their modest appearance at Laluth. There, the fact that both were outfitted by Enide's impoverished father depicted them on the same vestimentary plane: though the heir apparent of a kingdom, Erec donned borrowed, perhaps battered armor which was complementary with Enide's threadbare dress.

The vestimentary contrast between the couple at Laluth and at Carnant conveys not merely a sense of their passage from poverty to wealth, but also suggests a progressive development in terms of their natural qualities and social identities. In the first of these two scenes, the social significance of their coarsely attired appearance is minimized by the fact that they are perfectly suited to one another by their innate, natural qualities alone:

molt estoient igal et per
de corteisie et de biauté

Cf. Haidu, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20: «La panoplie représente ici la haute valeur chevaleresque à laquelle prétend Erec, valeur que tous lui reconnaissaient avant sa recréantise et qu'il veut maintenant affirmer de nouveau».

²² Z. P. Zaddy in her study of the arming scenes in «Chrétien de Troyes and the Epic Tradition», *CN* 21 (1961): 75, underestimates the importance of this scene within the context of later related scenes. She says merely that «one could well imagine that Chrétien had taken a *laisse* from some epic where force of circumstance makes it necessary for a woman to play squire to a knight and had merely transposed it out of assonanced decasyllables into octosyllabic couplets».

et de grant debonereté.
 Si estoient d'une meniere,
 d'unes mors et d'une matiere,
 que nus qui le voir volsist dire
 n'an poïst le meillor eslire
 ne le plus bel ne le plus sage.
 Molt estoient d'igal corage
 et molt avenoient ansanble;
 li uns a l'autre son cuer anble;
 onques deus si beles ymages
 n'asanbla lois ne mariages.

(vv. 1484-96)

Despite Enide's humbler socio-economic milieu, the couple share an inherent nobility that enables them to triumph despite their lack of the traditional accoutrements of chivalric and courtly feminine statue. However, the insufficiency of their natural qualities alone becomes evident after their union by «lois et mariages» which necessitates their achievement of a new identity as an exemplary couple *within* society. Accordingly, in a second scene of arming and dressing, each dons vestments that recall his initial social recognition. In her «robe la plus bele» (v. 2576f.), Enide replicates her appearance as «la plus bele» in the earlier rite of the «beisier», while in his resplendent armor Erec evokes the image of his former chivalric grandeur at the Tournament of Tenebroc²³. During their subsequent adventures, the couple must demonstrate their worthiness of the social emblems they wear²⁴.

C. Third Departure: From Limors to Brandigan.

In the account of the couple's reconciliation at the end of a long and perilous period of testing, vestimentary elements are

²³ The figure of the leopard in the carpet upon which Erec's arming takes place is indicative of his need for rehabilitation. After regressing from his leonine image at the Tournament of Tenebroc following the wedding (cf. v. 2212: «de fierté sanbla lyon»), Erec is now a «chevalier au léopard», as Frappier suggests: «Au moment où il l'emportait sur tous au tournoi de Tenebroc, peu de temps après son mariage, Erec paraissait sur le point de devenir un chevalier au lion... Depuis il a subi une relative rétrogradation, suggérée par le mot et l'image du léopard» (*op. cit.*, p. 29).

²⁴ Haidu comments that Erec and Enide «auront à se montrer dignes des signes extérieurs qui les marquent pour obtenir la réintégration sociale à la fin du roman» (*op. cit.*, pp. 20-1).

once again emphasized at the moment of a departure. When Enide is brutally struck by the Count of Limors because of her refusal to accept a forced marriage, and Erec, presumed dead, suddenly leaps to defend her, the comic relief of the castle's occupants fleeing in terror before the apparently resurrected *morz* is followed by a brief arming scene in which Erec runs for his shield while Enide takes up his lance. The account is remarkable for its quasi formulaic reiteration of Erec's first arming by Enide at Laluth:

Arming of Erec at Laluth

La pucele aporte l'escu
et la lance qui roide fu;
l'escu li baille, et il le prant,
par la guige a son col le pant.

(vv. 721-4)

Arming of Erec at Limors

Erec corrut son escu prandre,
par le guige a son col le pant;
et Enyde la lance prant;
si s'an viennent par mi la cort.

(vv. 4848-51)

At this dramatic juncture, the evocation of the couple's initial collaboration in preparation for the adventure of the Sparrow Hawk signals a resolution of the discord that necessitated the separate arming of Erec at Carnant. This resolution is further illustrated by their unconventional flight together on a single horse in contrast to the formal arrangement of the testing period, when Erec had obliged Enide to ride in silence before him. Appropriately, the period of renewed intimacy upon their arrival at Guivret's castle is marked by a reversal of the arming motif, in Enide's insistence on *disarming* and caring for Erec herself, followed immediately by the narrator's explicit confirmation that the testing period for the couple has come to an end:

Son seignor desarme et desvest;
si li a ses plaies lavees
ressuiees et rebandees,
car n'i leissa autrui tochier.
Or ne li set que reprochier
Erec, qui bien l'a esprovee;
vers li a grant amor trovee.

(vv. 5092-8)

When Erec and Enide set out from Guivret's castle for Arthur's court, in a scene reminiscent of their earlier departure for

that court from Laluth in «Li premiers vers», a new palfrey replaces the one given to Enide on the earlier occasion. The decoration on the saddlebow of this new mount elaborates an allusion to the story of Eneas, suggestive of the reconciliation of public and private spheres achieved by Erec and Enide²⁵. Shortly thereafter, in Brandigan, Erec too acquires new emblems of his chivalry: in preparation for his participation in the supreme test — the final «Joie de la Cort» adventure — he receives new arms, again from his host as in Laluth, his old ones being «usées et anpiriées et mal mises» (vv. 5640-1). The new accoutrements of the couple, however, unlike those of their departure from Carnant, are not mere outward signs of status and social function: they result from the demonstration of their merit, reaffirmed during the arduous testing period in the forest.

D. *The Arrival: Coronation at Nantes.*

The culmination of this process of signification is found in the coronation scene, which contains the most extended development of *descriptio* in the romance. In the final segment, the demonstrated worthiness of Erec and Enide and their complete integration with courtly society are celebrated in part through their coronation garb, which indicates their status as social prototypes. Enide is again attired by the Queen herself (vv. 6762-3), while Arthur provides Erec with a splendid robe and emerald sceptre which together furnish a composite representation of the Cosmos. On the robe is depicted the *quadrivium*, Geometry providing the measure of space; Arithmetic, that of discrete quantities; then Music, the measure of universal harmonies; and finally Astronomy, whose counsel on past and future is based on the movements of heavenly bodies (vv. 6684-728). This ornate robe and Erec's emerald sceptre, upon which are represented all earthly creatures (vv. 6809-19), organize a figural representation of the Cosmos around the new monarch, whose coronation garb consequently dramatizes the sacred nature of kingship in

²⁵ R. M. Spenseley, «Allusion as a Structural Device in Three Old French Romances», *RN* 15 (1973): p. 350, calls attention to the interpretative function of this extensive reference to a famous couple. See also J. S. Wittig, «The Aeneas-Dido Allusion in Chrétien's *Erec et Enide*», *CL* 22 (1970): pp. 237-53, and Maddox, *Structure and Sacring*, pp. 149-50.

courtly society²⁶. By virtue of the figuration on the coronation robe, outer signs and inner qualities merge at the vestimentary level of coherence, as the part becomes the whole as likewise the whole the part: the robe is the measure of both the man *and* the universe, in which Microcosm and Macrocosm are reunited.

The foregoing survey of vestimentary detail in Chrétien's *Erec et Enide* makes possible certain observations with regard to further study of description in medieval narrative. Heretofore, descriptive detail in medieval vernacular texts has often been viewed as significant primarily in terms of its localized symbolic value, sometimes on the assumption that isolated lexical items and *topoi* in vernacular works are to be treated according to exegetical methods of interpretation of significant words, phrases and passages. Yet our study suggests that at least some vernacular texts may embody descriptive codes in which discrete elements are recuperated within descriptive textual systems.

To broaden the investigation of descriptive practices in medieval vernacular works, it might therefore be useful to draw a hypothetical distinction among three fundamental modes of description in narrative. To the extent that such description, by virtue of its truth or verisimilitude, evokes the circumstances of daily life, it would be attributable to a *referential mode* which maintains a representational illusion in the mind of the reader. Such, for example, is the description of the poverty of Enide's father and household in «Li premiers vers» of *Erec*. By contrast, when the representational aspect of descriptive features is de-emphasized, so that they are perceived as the integuments of unspecified intellectual realms of meaning, description would conform to an *inferential mode* as discussed above. The leopard on the tapestry on which Erec is armed before setting out for Carnant, the tri-colored head of Enide's second palfrey and the sycamore tree beneath which Maboagrain's lady is seated in the orchard of the *Joie de la Cort* are examples of the type, which is particularly subject to varying critical interpretation. Between these modes of the referentially concrete and the inferentially abstract we may locate the *auto-referential mode* which is determined primarily by its participation in the descriptive conventions of literary discourse, such as the extensive utilization of the Nature topos in the initial portrait of Enide (vv. 411-41).

²⁶ Cf. Wetherbee on this episode, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

Either of the two denotative modes of description, the auto-referential as well as the referential, may become an accessory to the connotative inferential mode²⁷.

Our brief study of vestimentary detail in *Erec* reveals that the inferentiality of descriptive items is not totally restricted to localized occurrence but may become part of a recurrent category of description, suggesting that we may profitably distinguish further between *singulative*, or non-recurrent, descriptive items or sets of items, and *iterative* descriptive units. Iterativity is a distinctive feature of any code, which is in Barthes' definition «une perspective de citations . . . on ne connaît de lui que des départs et des retours; les unités qui en sont issues (celles que l'on inventorie) sont elle-mêmes, toujours, des sorties du texte, la marque, le jalon d'une digression virtuelle vers le reste d'un catalogue . . . elles sont autant d'éclats de ce quelque chose qui a toujours été déjà lu, vu, fait, vécu; le code est le sillon de ce déjà»²⁸. Yet we must recognize that homogeneous iterative elements are not *ipso facto* codes unless they serve as the signifiers or a distinct, separate dimension of signifieds, i.e., unless they are recuperated by a systematic inferential coherence.

In *Erec* auto-referential and referential detail is repeatedly recuperated within a variety of inferential dimensions as groups of vestimentary indices imply significant information regarding other levels of coherence in the work. While relayed primarily in terms of the functions of *Erec* and *Enide*, its importance is underlined by its extension to the presentation of minor characters and episodes. In the scene where Keu, Arthur's seneschal, appropriates the armor and horse of Gauvain to ride out to meet the young couple in the forest, *Erec* immediately recognizes both the armor and its unaccustomed bearer:

Mes Keux pas lui ne reconut,
car a ses armes ne parut
nule veraie conuissance;
tant cos d'espees et de lance
avoit sor son escu euz
que toz li tainz an ert cheuz.

(vv. 3951-6)

²⁷ For examples of the relationship between referential and inferential elements in modern narrative, see Jean-Michel Adam, *Linguistique et discours littéraire*, Paris 1976, pp. 101-6 and 121-31.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Paris 1970, p. 27f.

Keu's attitude toward the new arrival is consequently arrogant, and when Erec easily unhorses the offensive seneschal, the double, inverse representation of the inadequation of arms and prowess is evident: illustrious arms, inferior chivalry (Keu) versus inferior arms, illustrious chivalry (Erec). Triumphant again despite his battered armor, Erec exposes in Keu the disparity between the purloined arms of a great knight and the pretensions and *orgueil* of the seneschal. This episode is a further accessory to the emphasis, achieved by means of the vestimentary code, on the variable relations between outward signs of chivalric or courtly status and the merit of their bearer. The successive vestimentary sets disclose in the titular couple an initial disparity between innate qualities and outward signs and gradually evolve toward the convergence of the two, until innate qualities and outward signs are synchronized in a static, universalized portrait of the monarch as *imago mundi*.

The iteration of vestimentary indices at crucial junctures comprehends a wide range of inferential coordinates, including both affirmation and negation, states of euphoria and dysphoria, frugality as well as sumptuousness and ostentation, the alienation of hero and heroine as well as their union and reunion, and ultimately the reunion of courtly society, through its chief representatives, with the universe. Through the integration of vestimentary detail into a series of primary and accessory episodes related by variants of a single descriptive category, the cumulative dimension which both comprehends and transcends particular sets within this category is ultimately achronic and universalized, «renvoyant», in Zumthor's phrase, «à un concept plus ou moins diffus, qui est ici le sens»²⁹. Our study of the function of vestimentary coherence in *Erec* suggests, then, that while the location of descriptive codes in romance may shed new light on the particular nature of vernacular *descriptio*, especially with regard to its iterative qualities, it may also suggest the extent to which such codes participate in the so-called *san* of romance.

SARA STURM-MADDOX

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

DONALD MADDOX

University of Connecticut

²⁹ Zumthor, *Essai*, p. 362.