

*Sartorial Strategies: Outfitting Aristocrats and Fashioning Conduct in Late Medieval Literature*, by Nicole D. Smith. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. Pp. xiii+281. ISBN: 9780268041373. \$35.00.

IN MODERN PARLANCE “fashion” suggests superficial change as designers and consumers seek new silhouettes, new materials, and new techniques. In the Middle Ages, however, the term related to appearance, conduct, and, according to Nicole D. Smith, to morality. Following the work of feminist scholars like E. Jane Burns and gender studies scholars like Susan Crane (who oversaw Smith’s dissertation at Rutgers), *Sartorial Strategies* attends to the nuances of dress in the work of four authors: Marie de France, Heldris de Cornuälle, the *Gawain*-Poet, and Geoffrey Chaucer. Given the current understanding of fashion, Smith situates her book in two specific moments of innovation: first, in the twelfth century, when belts and knotting began to fit clothing closer to the body, and second, in the fourteenth century, when new practices in cloth cutting and sewing produced form-fitting garments with elaborate embroidery. Despite this framework, the book focuses less on these changes than on how dress communicates understanding of behavior and morality in medieval vernacular poetry. Thus, religious innovations after the Fourth Lateran Council mandating annual confession prove more significant to the book’s argument than the sartorial ones that frame it. The chapters in *Sartorial Strategies* are organized around four writers of romance, but the book also considers clerical writing to argue that all four authors synthesize religious and secular teaching in ways that create new understandings of aristocratic morality.

After a brief introduction, Smith devotes a single chapter to each of her four authors. The first two chapters explore how Marie de France and Heldris de Cornuälle redefine virtue and vice by highlighting the poets’ efforts to reconcile clerical teaching about morality with aristocratic investment in sartorial excess. Chapter 1 reads the *Lais* of Marie de France against clerical authors who condemn tight clothing as a symbol of eroticized, sinful bodies. Smith maintains that Marie reinterprets fashionable attire as moral constraint that enables virtuous erotic love. She notes that clothing reveals chivalric nobility, customs, and identity in *Le Fresne*, *Bisclavret*, and *Lanval* among others, but *Guigemar* provides the most compelling evidence for the thesis that Marie suggests that fashionable attire can represent both chivalric ideals and religious virtue. Indeed, the belt and knotted shirt that the lovers exchange in *Guigemar* reveal that tight clothes can be disciplinary rather than decadent. Chapter 2 turns to Heldris de Cornuälle’s *Silence*. While most critics who consider clothing in

this thirteenth-century romance concentrate on the protagonist's transvestism, Smith attends to the poet's use of *effectio*, a rhetorical device that provides personal description, to argue that Silence's attire highlights her moral perfection and makes her a measure against which the ethical conduct of others may be evaluated. Thus, Smith asserts, "The private morality of one unlikely heroine gives rise to a public morality" (94).

Chapters 3 and 4 jump to the late fourteenth century and focus on the act of confession itself. Although belts are more characteristic of the earlier period, chapter 3 focuses on the green girdle of the late medieval *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Attending to Middle English religious guides that recommend reforming dress in order to inspire moral reform and to books of chivalric conduct that assert a spiritual value to arms and armor, Smith argues that Gawain's belt becomes a penitential garment that catalyzes both private and public spiritual transformation. Chapter 4 turns from popular romances to Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*, the first vernacular penitential guide written by an English layman. Smith asserts that, although Chaucer wrote many romances, his most vivid descriptions of attire appear in the last of the *Canterbury Tales*. The chapter outlines how Chaucer includes sartorial discussions in each section of the *Parson's Tale*, which correspond to contrition, confession, and satisfaction, the three requirements of penance. Smith claims that the Parson describes fashionable attire as sinful in the first section, including it in discussions of pride and lust, but that the section on satisfaction suggests that "pleasure-in-dress" can provide "a means to spiritual delight" (167). In this reading, Chaucer's Parson moves from a condemnation to a celebration of fashion.

This is a well-researched and informative book. Occasionally, I wanted Smith to pay more attention to issues of gender raised by both the religious materials and the primary texts. I wondered whether the religious guides address male and female attire equally and in the same terms. I also wanted to know more about how gender and sexuality intersect with the descriptions of attire that she studies. Smith addresses this connection insightfully in the chapter on the *Parson's Tale*; however, the chapter on *Silence* glosses over such considerations with comments like, "Transvestism, while a charged iconography, allows Helderis to position his protagonist as a mirror of both female beauty and male chivalry, effectively using dress to interrogate as its primary goal not questions of gender but those of morality" (94). To my mind, gender and morality intertwine and should be questioned together. I found most exciting the moments when the book engages with textual cruxes that have occupied much previous scholarship and offers new insights into how these moments may be understood. The

chapter on Marie de France ends by explaining why Guigemar does not wear his knotted shirt, although his beloved does wear her belt. Whereas many readers see a double standard here, for Smith, the discrepancy has to do less with control of feminine sexuality than with constructions of masculinity, because tight clothes were thought to diminish a knight's performance in battle. Similarly, the chapter on *Silence* concludes with a discussion of the heroine's final submissiveness before the king, an episode that feminist scholars have interpreted as a victory for patriarchal gender roles, but that Smith regards as ideal penitential behavior, applicable to men and women alike. The chapter on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* suggests that the Arthurian court's laughter at Gawain's return proves welcoming and transformative and not just problematic in tone when compared to Gawain's somberness. The Chaucer chapter ends by noting that fashion provides a unifying theme in the *Canterbury Tales*. Overall, *Sartorial Strategies* offers provocative and insightful new readings of familiar texts that will be of interest to both specialists and advanced students alike.

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