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COSTUME IN THE MIDDLE ENGLISH METRICAL ROMANCES

THE question of how far the Middle English metrical romances and their continental prototypes went in portraying realistically the life and times in which they were written and how much of the detail in them is merely literary convention has long been a moot one. W. P. Ker wrote: "The longer romances are really modern novels—studies of contemporary life, characters and emotions, mixed up with adventures more or less surprising,"[1] but added in another place, "the romance writers of the twelfth century did much to make romance into a mechanic art, . . . reduced the game to a system and left the different romantic combinations and conventions within the reach of almost any 'prentice hand. . . . "[2] M. L. Clédat wrote: "Les peintures de mœurs chevaleresques, les descriptions de fêtes, de tournois et de combats, nous plaisent encore par elles mêmes lorsqu'elles sont vives et légères, mais elles valent surtout par les renseignements précieux qu'elles nous fournissent sur la vie réelle et sur l'idéal du monde chevaleresque."[3] There is obviously some vagueness here, and it becomes desirable to separate the realistic from the conventional material in the Middle English metrical romances in order to determine where the art of the romance writers was merely "mechanic" and where they were actually attempting to give "renseignements précieux . . . sur la vie réelle et sur l'idéal du monde chevaleresque."

The place to begin a search for realism in the romances is with costume, for much descriptive detail is expended upon it, some writers like the author of the *Laud Troy Book* taking a particular delight in it. The details are scattered, and to a modern reader seem usually generalized and consequently vague. But it is necessary to remember that slight details and general terms would call to mind in a medieval reader a picture which the modern reader can obtain only by research, orienting himself in the time, and giving himself the information and understanding of the medieval reader. The modern novelist in order to enable his reader to visualize the costume of his heroine needs only to describe her as dressed in a severely tailored black suit and small black hat. More details, the length of the skirt and coat, the exact manner in which the suit is made, are unnecessary and might be tedious. The slight descriptive details are enough to arouse the desired visual image, because the reader, is familiar

[1] W. P. Ker, *English Literature: Medieval* (New York, 1912), p. 112.
[2] W. P. Ker, *Epic and Romance* (London, 1922), pp. 325–326.
[3] Petit de Julleville, *Histoire de la langue et de la littérature française* (Paris, 1896), p. 336.

with such a costume in contemporary society. Yet that same description will in fifty years appear inadequate and generalized because of the shifting character of fashion. This same condition exists in the romances. When one reads in *Octavian:*

The lady stood clothyd yn palle[4]

the line stimulates in one no visual image. One must first know what *palle* was and then what style of dress a lady of the author's period (c.-1450)[5] would have worn, details which the original readers could have supplied at once from familiar experience. When the author of *Ywaine and Gawin* wrote:

. . . many bald barowne,
Cled in purpur and ermyne,
With girdels al of gold ful fyne[6]

[4] *Octavian* (Cotton), ed. G. Sarrazin (Heilbronn, 1885), 517.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. xxv.

[6] *Ywaine and Gawin*, ed. J. Ritson, *Ancient English Metrical Romances* (London, 1802), I, 1402–1404.—These lines occur in the passage (1383–1412) in which the lady Ywaine rides forth to meet King Arthur and his company. They do not occur in the corresponding passage in the French of Chrétien. (See Kristian von Troyes, *Yvain*, ed. W. Foerster, Halle 1926, 2329–2369.) There the lady's costume which the English author passes by with—

Sho was al dight with drewries der; (1406)

is described in some detail (See *Yvain*, 2359–2367) but no mention is made of the costume of the gentlemen who accompany her. Wells (J. E. Wells, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, New Haven, 1923, p. 65) gives the date of the English poem as between 1300–1350, but the mention of the golden girdles worn by the gentlemen would place the poem after 1327 in the reign of Edward III. "The reign of Edward III is one of the most important eras in the History of Costume. The complete changes that take place in every habit, civil or military, render its effigies and illuminations more distinctly conspicuous than those perhaps of any other period, from the Conquest to the days of Elizabeth. . . . The long robes and tunics of the preceding reigns vanished altogether, and a close-fitting body garment, called a *cote-hardie*, buttoned all the way down the front, and reaching to the middle of the thigh, became the prevailing dress of the higher classes. It was sometimes magnificently embroidered and the splendid military belt was worn by every knight, buckled across the hips over this new and peculiar garment. From the sleeves of this *cote*, which sometimes only descended to the elbow (discovering the sleeves of an under-vest or doublet, buttoned from thence to the wrist), depended long slips of cloth, generally painted white in the illuminations, which were called tippets, and over this dress was worn occasionally a mantle, exceedingly long, and fastened by four or five large buttons upon the right shoulder, so that when suffered to hang loose it covered the wearer entirely to the feet; but the front part being thrown back over the left shoulder, it hung in folds behind, and formed a sort of *cope* upon the breast. . . ." (J. R. Planché, *History of British Costume*, London, 1874, pp. 138–140.) Other descriptions of male attire in the poem indicate the same period.

Bilive sho gert syr Ywaine bath,
And cled him sethin in gude scarlet,
Forord wele and with gold fret,

he was giving his readers realistic detail, not conventional generalities as at first glance he would seem to be. One has only to examine carefully and compare some of the descriptions of costume to see that, unlike the features of the people who wear them, they are not all alike. And what is distinctly more important as demonstrating an effort to be realistic on the part of the romance writers is the manner in which they change the costume descriptions which they find in their sources in order to make them conform with the fashions of their own day.

His dobelett was of red welvet,
Off bryght golde botuns ibete,
That worthely was wrovghte.

His mantell was of skarlett fyne,
Furryd wyth good armyne,
Ther myght no better been,
The bordure all of red sendell;[7]

writes the author of *Ipomadon*, describing the dress of his hero. When this passage is compared with the corresponding one in the French source of the English romance, Hue de Rotelande's *Ipomedon*, the changes made by the English writer in this description become significant. Hue de Rotelande wrote:

D'un purpre cendal iert vestu,
Mes pur le grant chaud, k'adonk(e) fu,
Li bliaus palfure n'esteit,
A merveille li aveneit
Li mantel iert fure d'hermin,
Ke mult iert blanch e bon & fin,
E (il) fut un poi de cute
Od vermail cendal adente

A girdel ful riche for the nanes,
Of perry and of preciows stanes. (1102–1106)

This passage is not in the French. When the lady finds the naked Ywaine in the forest she

Tok hose, and shose, and serk, and breke;
A riche robe als gan sho ta,
And a saint of silk alswa . . . (1770–1772)

In the French the type of costume left by the lady is quite different.

Robe veire, cote et mantel
Li fet porter de soie an grainne.
Cele li porte et si li mainne
An destre un palefroi mout buen.
Et avuec ce i met del suen
Chemise et braies deliiees
Et chauces nueves bien tailliees. (2974–2980)

[7] *Ipomadon*, ed. E. Kölbing (Breslau, 1889), 367–373.

La blanche hermyne mult avint,
Kant (a) purpre & (a) vermail se tint.[8]

The French romance dates from the twelfth century, the English from the reign of Edward III (c. 1350),[9] and the English writer has changed the "old fashioned" costume described in the French and dressed his hero in the costume of his period. He does not mention the "old fashioned" *bliaut*, which had been worn in the reigns of Henry II and Richard I a hundred and fifty years earlier.[10] Instead, he describes Ipomedon as wearing the "new" tight-fitting, buttoned doublet and long mantle.[11] The doublet, too, is made of velvet, a textile just beginning to be commonly used.[12] Yet quite different from the costume of Ipomadon[13] is that of Diomedes and Ulysses in the *Laud Troy Book*, written during the period of astonishing extravagance in costume at the end of the century (c. 1400).[14]

These kynges to here hors take,——
Wel richely dyght ffor worschepe sake:
Thei dede on robes that hem best payes,
Off riche gold were alle the rayes,[15]
Off riche scarlet were bothe here champes,[16]
Poudred ful of golden lampes,[17]
With lilye-leues and fflour-delys;
The robes were of mochel prys,

[8] Hue de Rotelande, *Ipomedon*, ed. E. Kölbing and E. Koschwitz (Breslau, 1889), 377–386.

[9] See Wells, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

[10] The *bliaut* was a garment worn by both men and women. When worn by men it was a long surcoat. See E. Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionnaire raisonné du mobilier français* (Paris, 1872–75), III, pp. 38–61. When worn by women it was a court dress. See Viollet-le-Duc, above citation, and R. E. Goddard, *Women's Costume in French Texts of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Baltimore, 1927), pp. 40–59. See also Planché, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

[11] See Note 6.

[12] "In the earliest of the inventories which we have of church vestments, that of Exeter cathedral, 1277, velvet is not spoken of; but in St. Paul's, London, A.D. 1295, there is some notice of velvet with its kindred web 'fustian,' for chasubles. Velvet is for the first time mentioned at Exeter in 1327, but as in two pieces not made up, of which some yards had been sold for vestment-making. From the middle of the fourteenth century velvet is of common occurrence." Daniel Rock, *Textile Fabrics* (London, 1876), p. 31.

[13] For further examples of costume changes in *Ipomadon* compare 2456–2467, 2696–2699, 7068–7077 with *Ipomedon* 2725–2770, 2961–2966, 8629–8637.

[14] See Wells, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

[15] *Rayes* (*O. Fr. raie*), embroidery. For examples of its use see T. Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française* (Paris, 1889).

[16] *Champes* (fields) here refers to the cloth itself, the robes being made of scarlet cloth embroidered in gold.

[17] *Lampes*. It is possible that *lamps* were embroidered on the costumes, but it seems more likely that this word is *lamp* (*O. Fr. lame*) a thin plate, here referring to bits of golden metal on the order of spangles.

Thei were parted with riche palle.[18]
The knyghtes were fair & clene with-alle,
Here hodes dyght with gold ribanes,——
Better weres non among the Danes;——
Thei were with gold wel I-fret,
The ffloures of gold on hem set,
With wilde bestes and fflyande ffoules,
Liouns, lipardes, ernes, and owles
Off riche gold that louely schon;
In hem stode many a riche ston,
Saphur riche, and selidone,
Erbe-de-bothe & Cassidone,
And euere among the dyamaund,
Sewes wel with gode orfoyle-suand;[19]
The frette of gold was like a belle,
So were thei gret & horrible;[20]
Worth michel gode thei were apraysed,
Thei were so couched and hye vp-raysed.[21]

These men are in a distinctly different costume from that of Ipomadon. They are wearing parti-colored clothes heavily embroidered with designs of animals and birds and studded with jewels, the elaborate costumes of the reigns of Richard II and Henry IV, one of the periods of greatest extravagance in dress in English history. Astonishing as it may seem, it is not necessary to attribute the excessive richness of these costumes in the *Laud Troy Book* to the author's fancy; he was giving a realistic picture of court costume in his own time.[22]

[18] *Parted* (*O. Fr. partir*) The robes were parti-colored, pieces of *palle* being inserted possibly in the manner of gores. Parti-colored costumes were much in vogue during the reigns of Richard II and Henry IV. See Planché, *op. cit.*, p. 166.

[19] *Orfoyle-suand* (*O. Fr. orfileure*), gold thread, and (*O. Fr. suance*), matching, i.e., gold thread of suitable richness.

[20] *Horrible* does not make sense in this line. The author is intending no satire, and there is no indication that he felt the head-gear he was describing repulsive. *Horrible* is probably an error for *en orbelle* (à la ronde) meaning that the hats were great and large around. For an illustration of these large bell-shaped hats see J. H. Hefner-Alteneck, *Costumes œuvres d'art et utensiles depuis le commencement du moyen âge jusqu'à la fin du dix-huitième siècle* (2d. ed., Leipzig, 1919), IV, plate 236.

[21] *Laud Troy Book*, ed. J. E. Wulfing, E.E.T.S. 121, 122 (London, 1902), 8039–8064. Compare also 8238–8252, 14440–14446 in the same romance.

[22] See Planché, *op. cit.*, pp. 163–173, 185–191. For further descriptions of male costume in the romances see *Sir Degore*, ed. E. V. Utterson, *Select Pieces of Early Popular Poetry* (London, 1817), I, 700–703; *Sir Eglamour*, ed. J. O. Halliwell, *Thornton Romances*, Camden Society (London, 1844), 857–860, 1255–1256; *The Awntyrs of Arthure* (Ireland), ed. J. Robson, *Three Early English Metrical Romances*, Camden Society (London, 1842), st. 28: 1–4; *The Avowynge of Arthur*, ed. J. Robson, *Three Early English Metrical Romances*, Camden Society (London, 1842), st. 39: 6–8; *Morte Arthure*, ed. E. Björkman (Heidelberg and New York, 1915), 3332-3337, 3456–3463, 3470–3475; *Gawain and the Green Knight*,

Feminine costume is described with equal care and attention to realistic detail, varying, like that of the men, with the change of fashion. In *Kyng Alisaunder* the queen is described.

> Dame Olimpias, among this pres,
> Sengle rod, al mantal-les;
> Al nakid theo heved, in a croune,
> She rod thorughout al the toune.
> Hire yolowe heir was faire atyred,
> With riche strynges of gold wyred,
> And wryen hire abouten al,
> To hire gentil myddel smal.[23]

She is wearing a dress without a mantle, and her hair hangs loose about her shoulders, a crown being her head-dress. The poem is dated "before 1330"[24] but the costume is that of the period of Edward I, (1272–1307). "The ladies of the reign of Edward I appear in the robe or kirtle, made high in the neck, with long tight sleeves, and a train, over which is generally seen another vestment, the surcoat, super-tunic, or cyclas without sleeves, but as long in the skirt as the gown itself, and sometimes held up by one hand to keep it out of the way of the feet. To these two garments are added as the occasion may require, the mantel, fastened on the shoulders by cords and tassels. . . . The effigy of Eleanor, queen of Edward I, is remarkable for its simplicity, and the absence of any kind of head attire; her hair streaming naturally upon her shoulders from under the regal diadem."[25] It is not unlikely that the picture of Olimpias riding through the streets was suggested in some of its details by a similar progress of Queen Eleanor.

In the *Morte Arthure* we have a woman's costume described in more detail than that of Olimpias.

> A duches dereworthily dyghte in dyaperde wedis,
> In a surcott of sylke selkouthely hewede,
> All with loyotour ouerlaide lowe to þe hemmes,
> And with ladily lappes the lenghe of a ȝerde,

---

ed. J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon (Oxford, 1925), 151–167. For further examples of costume "modernizing" compare *Partonope of Blois*, ed. A. T. Bodtker, E.E.T.S. E.S. 109 (London, 1912), 7702–7704, 12034–12040, with *Partonopeus de Blois*, ed. G. A. Crapelet (Paris, 1834), 6270–6276, 9167–9169.

[23] *Kyng Alisaunder*, ed. H. Weber, *Metrical Romances* (Edinburgh, 1810), I, 203–210. In the corresponding passage in Eustache's *Roman de Toute Chevalrie* upon which the English romance is based, the queen is wearing a purple *bliaut* and her hair is arranged in a head dress of gold wire. No mention is made of a crown. See MS. *Français* 24364 (Bibliothèque Nationale fol. 2 r, col. 2).

[24] Wells, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

[25] Planché, *op. cit.*, pp. 120–121. As Eleanor died in November, 1290, it does not seem likely that a romance describing a costume affected by her would be written much later than the end of Edward's reign, 1307.

And all redily reuersside with rebanes of golde,
(With) bruchez and besauntez and oþer bryghte stonys
Hir bake and hir breste was brochede all ouer,
With kelle and will corenall clenliche arrayede,
And þat so comly of colour on knowen was neuer.[26]

George Neilson convincingly dates the poem about 1364–1365 in the reign of Edward III.[27] The description fits exactly the feminine costume of that period, one of the distinguishing features of which was the long, trailing sleeves (*lappes*). "The habits of the ladies of this reign were exceedingly sumptuous and extravagant, 'passing the men in all manner of arraie and curious clothing'; and several distinct fashions seem to have existed at the same period. One consisted of the gown or kirtle, with tight sleeves, sometimes reaching to the wrist, sometimes only to the elbow, and in the latter case, with the same pendent streamers or tippets attached to them that we have noticed in the dress of the other sex. The gown was cut rather lower in the neck, fitted remarkably close to the waist, and was occasionally worn so long, not only in the train but in front, as to be necessarily held up when walking."[28] In the matter of costume the writers of the metrical romances in England were realistic, changing the dress of their characters as that of their readers changed.[29]

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[26] *Morte Arthure, op. cit.*, 3251–3259. Compare with this description that of the lady in *Piers Plowman* A (c. 1362) ed. W. W. Skeat (Oxford, 1886).

Thenne was I war of a wommon wonderliche clothed,
Purfylet with pelure the ricchest vppon eorthe,
I-corouned with a coroune the kyng hath no bettre;
Alle hir fyue fyngres weore frettet with rynges,
Of the preciousest perre that prince wered euere;
In red scarlet heo rod i-rybaunt with gold; *Passus* II, 8–13.

The similarity of the costumes suggests corresponding dates for the poems.

[27] See George Neilson, *Huchown of the Awle Ryale* (Glasgow, 1902), pp. 59–66, and *The Antiquary*, 38: 73, 229. It is not necessary to accept Neilson's attribution of authorship to accept his historical interpretation of the poem.

[28] Planché, *op. cit.*, pp. 143–144.

[29] For further descriptions of female costumes see *Libeaus Desconus*, ed. M. Kaluza, *Alteng. Bibliothek* (Leipzig, 1890), v, 879–900, 2176–2180; *Gawain and the Green Knight, op. cit.*, 1736–1741; *Awntyrs of Arthure, op. cit.*, st. 2: 1–9; *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, ed. Ritson, *Ancient English Metrical Romances* (London, 1802), III, 178–186; *Le Morte Arthur*, ed. J. D. Bruce, E.E.T.S., E.S. 88 (London, 1903), 2054–2058; *Sir Degrevant*, ed. J. O. Halliwell, *Thornton Romances*, Camden Society (London, 1844), 625–654.

For further examples of "modernizing" compare *Launfal*, ed. J. Ritson, *Ancient English Metrical Romances* (London, 1802), I, 229–248 and *Landeval*, ed. G. L. Kittredge, *American Journal of Philology*, X, 51–60 with Marie de France, *Lai de Lanval*, ed. Warnke, 3d. ed. (1925), 53–64; *Ipomadon, op. cit.*, 6454–6465 with *Ipomedon op. cit.*, 7940–7969; *Partonope, op. cit.*, 9010–9013 with Partonopeus, *op. cit.*, 7447–7470.

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[Footnotes]

[29] **Launfal**
George Lyman Kittredge
The American Journal of Philology, Vol. 10, No. 1. (1889), pp. 1-33.
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