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**Identity and Disguise in a Late French Epic: *Hervis de Mes***

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*Hervis de Mes* is a branch of the provincial epic cycle known as the *geste des Loherains*. The oldest and most prominent poem in the cycle, *Garin le Loherain*, depicts the bitter rivalry between two feudal houses during the reign of Pépin le Bref; succeeding branches relate the continuation of this conflict by the descendants of Garin and his enemies. *Hervis de Mes* was composed in the mid-thirteenth century, after most of the other works in the *geste*; fictionally, however, it extends the cycle by reverse chronology, recounting the adventures and exploits of Garin's father before the great feud. Such instances of continuation in reverse were common in the formation of epic cycles, and were a tribute to the popularity of their heroes. While *Hervis de Mes* did not achieve the success of its celebrated predecessor, the assonanced version of the text survives in five manuscripts, and one manuscript preserves its sixteenth-century prose translation.

Like many *chansons de geste* of the thirteenth century, *Hervis* represents a significant departure from the conventions of earlier epics such as the *Chanson de Roland* or *Garin le Loherain*. Indeed, it has often been criticized for its lack of epic tone and its appropriation of romanesque narrative devices; as a result, *Hervis de Mes* is most often cited rather for its supposedly realistic portrayal of contemporary institutions than for its literary merits.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have shown particular interest in the striking representation of the bourgeoisie: since the hero is of both noble and bourgeois descent, some critics have interpreted the poem as a

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reflection of the rising middle class, a belated apology for the bourgeois origin of the great Loherain heroes.<sup>2</sup>

While it is true that *Hervis de Mes* evokes changing social structures in thirteenth-century France, I believe that the ideological function of the text has often been misrepresented due to a neglect of its literary dimension. Rather than dismissing the work as an impure specimen of epic poetry, it might be more fruitful to examine the nature and function of its narrative strategies. In fact, a detailed study of these devices reveals that bourgeois characters and values are introduced into the text only to be ridiculed and ultimately replaced by the status quo. The hero is increasingly portrayed as the product of matrilineal nobility, and his bourgeois origins are all but dismissed by the end of the poem.<sup>3</sup>

An exhaustive demonstration of this thesis is naturally beyond the scope of the present paper. I shall consider, however, one of the most significant devices used to vilify the bourgeoisie, namely the motif of disguise and hidden identity. While this structure is to be found even in the earliest French epics, problems of identity take on immense proportions in the compositional framework of *Hervis de Mes*. A diachronic analysis of the device demonstrates that it performs a similar ideological function in both early and late *chansons de geste*; *Hervis de Mes*, however, reinterprets the motif based on the exigencies of its own social and cultural context.

I shall begin by outlining examples of disguise and concealed identity in other French epics from the early twelfth to the mid-thirteenth century. The subsequent analysis of *Hervis de Mes* will show how this text exploits the device to trigger negative judgments of bourgeois characters and their values.

Let us consider first of all the use of disguise in the *chanson de geste*. In the *Charroi de Nîmes*, a twelfth-century epic of the Guillaume

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cycle, it is by means of a Trojan horse ruse that Guillaume is able to defeat the Saracens and take control of the city of

Mîmes.<sup>4</sup> Disguising himself as a simple merchant, the hero penetrates the enemy stronghold with a *charroi* full of Christian warriors.

Guillaume's change of identity involves for the most part a change in social status. The chevalier impersonates a type that is normally excluded from the epic community, namely the bourgeois. This transformation is reflected and stylized in his mode of disguise, which is characterized by significant articles of clothing and associated objects. Guillaume dons for example a coarse "gonnele" and "sollers de vache" (vv. 1329-30). These items belong to a familiar *topos* of medieval literature, the portrait of the *vilain* (It must be noted that "vilain" may designate a non-noble in general or a peasant in particular; the epic portrait of the *vilain*<sup>5</sup> usually refers to a peasant, but Guillaume makes no distinction here, using a peasant's costume to portray a merchant.) In any case, he also makes his "bourse" and his wares quite evident to demonstrate that he is a tradesman (vv. 1104-5). Furthermore, he devises a false personal history, claiming to be a merchant of Canterbury with a wife and eighteen children (vv. 1122-25).

Guillaume's disguise serves a number of functions in the *Charroi de Nîmes*. It not only facilitates the victory of the hero, but it is also rich in comic value, given the obvious disparity between the renowned figure of Guillaume Fierabrace and his exaggeratedly pathetic garments.<sup>6</sup> This humor is at the expense of two groups of characters: first of all, the *vilain*/bourgeois whose clothing and occupations are traditional objects of disdain in the *chanson de geste*, and secondly the Saracens, who are duped by Guillaume's disguise.

The late twelfth-century epics *Floovant* and *La Prise d'Orenges* make liberal use of dissimulation, again with Saracens as victims.<sup>7</sup> In the former poem, Richier disguises himself as a pagan in order

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to free Floovant from a pagan prison; in the latter work, Guillaume and his companions assume the identity of Saracen messengers in order to penetrate the city of Orange. The modes of disguise are described in some detail in each of the two works: the characters blacken their skin, speak the language of the enemy, utter the stereotypical pagan greetings and oaths, and invent elaborate personal histories. A similar episode appears in the somewhat later poem *Huon de Bordeaux*, when the Christian warrior Gériaume pretends to be a Moslem, denouncing Christians and pronouncing Saracen oaths.<sup>8</sup> In these three works, then, disguise again serves a comic purpose. Ultimately, however, the device contributes to the relationship of complicity between the *jongleur* and his audience, who share the knowledge that the Saracens are being outwitted.

Finally, dissimulation also appears in the form of concealed identity, which may include a simple refusal to reveal one's name and lineage or even a fabricated identity; it is the lack of associated objects and physical or linguistic masks that distinguish it from disguise. In *Floovant*, for example, the hero is exiled by his father Clovis for a childish prank; he therefore sets off to distinguish himself in the wars of another sovereign against the Saracens, but he conceals his identity until he has successfully driven back the enemy. Such instances of hidden identity resemble those to be found in romance: the hero loses or changes his identity after a disgrace, and must accomplish a quest for self before regaining his position.

These examples demonstrate that changes of identity in the *chanson de geste* serve to facilitate victory over the heathen adversary; they highlight the unworthiness of those groups excluded from the closed circle of Christian knighthood; and they permit the protagonist to realize his full potential as an epic hero.

*Hervis de Mes* includes several examples of both disguise and concealed identity; the following brief summary will concentrate on those particular aspects

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of the narrative:<sup>9</sup>

The first half of the story relates the early adventures of Hervis, who is the son of the bourgeois Thieri and the noble Aelis (daughter of the duke of Metz). Thieri wishes to teach his son the value of money and the ways of commerce, but the young Hervis has inherited a noble penchant for spending. At the fair in Lagny, where he was sent to buy cloth goods, he purchases instead a beautiful slave girl, Biatrix, who refuses to reveal her identity. We know that in reality she is the daughter of the King of Tyre and that she has been kidnapped and sold into slavery. Thieri is furious at the

exorbitant sum his son spent on the lady, and insisting that she must be a prostitute, he exiles the couple from Metz.

After marrying the fair Biatris, who is by now in love with him, Hervis goes off in search of adventure. He distinguishes himself at the tournament in Senlis, where he preserves his anonymity while saving the day for his maternal cousin, the Count of Bar. Eventually, however, these adventures become too costly, and Biatris sends Hervis (disguised as a merchant) to her native city of Tyre to sell a cloth she has embroidered with portraits of her family. The King of Tyre recognizes his daughter's handiwork and purchases the cloth for a handsome sum, and Hervis thus discovers the true identity of his wife. He feigns ignorance as to her whereabouts, but Biatris's brother (Floire) becomes suspicious and has him followed by two spies disguised as pilgrims. As soon as Floire discovers that his sister has married the son of a bourgeois, he comes to Metz disguised as a merchant and kidnaps Biatris. Hervis, however, called away from a war in Brabant, succeeds in rescuing his wife with the help of his squire, who disguises himself as a pilgrim in order to penetrate the castle in Tyre. Ultimately, Hervis is recognized by Biatris's family and by his many other enemies as the noble champion of Lorraine.

I shall distinguish here six instances of dissimulation, which fall into three basic categories.

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The first pair constitutes a double instance of concealed identity. Both Biatris and Hervis have occasion to hide their name and lineage in the first half of the story, for different reasons--but with similar results.

Biatris has rather mysterious motives for not disclosing her identity to Hervis and his family. She attributes her silence to the fact that she was kidnapped and brought to the fair against her will: "Puisque mes cors fut amblez et ravis" (v. 1308). Not inclined to invent another identity for herself, she is content merely to assert: "Une caitive sui d'etrange regné" (v. 1296).

It is, however, the mixed reactions of other characters that reveal the deeper motivation for this instance of hidden identity. Hervis, who needs only to be assured that she is a virgin, falls instantly in love with Biatris and declares her to be a "proude femme" (v. 1802). The noble Aelis, Hervis's mother, is immediately drawn to the Tyrian princess for two reasons: Biatris is strikingly beautiful ("II n'a plus bele en .LX. citez," v. 1927) and she is obviously of noble birth ("Si semble bien de gentil parenté" v. 1927a).

The bourgeois side of Hervis's family, however, interprets the situation in an entirely different light. Hervis displays his new purchase first of all to his paternal uncles, who instantly assume that Biatris must be a prostitute: "T'as acheté une putain miautrix / Que comunai estoit cie a Ligni," (vv. 1788-89). Thieri, the bourgeois father of Hervis, reacts with precisely the same language and is concerned mainly with the exorbitant sum spent by his son. Thieri's goal as a father had been to teach the young man to accumulate wealth ("gaaignier," v. 294), not to spend it. The audience is thus bound to judge the bourgeois reaction unfavorably on two grounds: the merchant's concern for accumulation is traditionally condemned in the literature of the period; and furthermore, it is money that prevents these characters from recognizing the true worth and nobility concealed behind the

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heroine's silence.

Hervis conceals his name and lineage when, during his exile, he assists his maternal cousin, the Count of Bar, in the tournament at Senlis. The hero's explicit motive is the humility associated with ideal chivalry: "... gentis cors ne se doit ja vanter" (v. 5240). Again, the diverging reactions of noble and bourgeois characters reveal the ideological motivations of the strategy: the Count of Flanders senses that Hervis belongs to the noble lineage of the Count of Bar: "Je ne sai qui il est; mais li cuers le me dist / Qu'il est de vo lignage et vos carneus amis" (vv. 2760-61). When the Count of Bar later visits Metz and relates the exploits of the mysterious hero, Aelis recognizes at once that they are speaking of her son. Thieri, however, refuses to believe his son capable of knightly virtues: "Ja tant n'avra en lui proëce ne bonté" (v. 2818). The bourgeois character thus fails again to discern noble qualities, this time those of his own son.

Like Floovant and the heroes of romance, Hervis does not regain and realize his identity until he proves himself in a

series of adventures. It is only when he returns from Tyre laden with gold that he merits the forgiveness of his greedy father. At this time, Thieri learns the true identity of Biatrix as well as the knightly exploits of his son; he is forced to beg their forgiveness on his knees. Henceforth, Thieri and his values fade behind the glory of Hervis, who soon sets out to distinguish himself in truly epic battles.

The hero still must contend, however, with the brother of Biatrix, who refuses to accept a "filz de vilain" for a brother-in-law. Hervis is thus obliged to prove the validity of his matrilineal nobility once again during the second half of the story. It is here that we find the second group of dissimulated characters, two related examples of rather elaborate disguise: both the Tyrian spies and the hero's squire assume the identity of pilgrims. Their motives are quite similar, for both instances involve

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the capture or recapture of Biatrix. Their mode of disguise evokes a familiar type: they obtain significant objects and clothing typically associated with the pilgrim, such as "l'esclavine," "le bourdon," and "le chapel feutr " (vv. 3919-23, 7826-29). The Tyrian spies are chosen also for their multilingualism: "Il n'est langages qu'il ne sacent parler" (v. 3899).

The two sets of disguised pilgrims fulfill similar functions in the narrative: like other epic characters we have noted, they dissimulate their identity in order to penetrate into the world of the adversary. In addition, disguise heightens suspense and directs the audience's sympathy to a specific character. When the unsuspecting Hervis extends his hospitality to the Tyrian spies, the *jongleur* proliferates exclamations of the type "Mais s'il seüst lor cuer et lor penser / Il lor eüst andeus les ci s cop s" (vv. 4624-25). When, however, the hero's squire succeeds in penetrating the Tyrian castle, the deception is condoned, and the disguised character is referred to as "gentis ... et bers" (v. 7917). The duped adversaries are this time both noble and Christian; their enemy status derives from a failure to recognize the nobility of Hervis.

Our final examples of dissimulation fall somewhere between hidden identity and actual disguise. Hervis and Floire, Biatrix's brother, both assume the role of merchants, each visiting the other's city for a hidden purpose. Their modes of semi-disguise display a parallel configuration: each claims to be a bourgeois of Normandy, and each gives banquets for the other merchants in the city. They both flaunt their [goods to confirm their occupation, and Hervis even invents a story to explain why he has so little to sell. Unlike Guillaume, neither character serves to ridicule the merchant type he is impersonating. Like Guillaume's disguise, however, these artifices are revealing in terms of the characters they dupe. Biatrix's father suspects that Hervis is no "vilain" (3781), and thus nobility once again manages to recognize nobility. When

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Prince Floire arrives in Metz, however, it is once again Thieri who suffers at the expense of disguise. Since Floire agrees to pay a handsome sum to remain in the city, Thieri's bourgeois greed gets the better of him, and he becomes the unwitting instrument of Biatrix's abduction. Once more, the avaricious bourgeois fails to discern the prince beneath the merchant.

The use of hidden identity and disguise in *Hervis de Mes* thus corresponds in many ways to its use in other epics. Modes of disguise are quite similar: characters invent false personal histories, make use of significant objects or clothing, speak a foreign language, or simply refuse to reveal their origins. Furthermore, the motif fulfills the same basic functions in *Hervis de Mes* as it does in other epics. The poet exploits the device to establish a certain intimacy with the audience, to reinforce the exclusion of non-noble types, and to direct judgments against the hero's adversaries. It is the adversaries who have changed in *Hervis de Mes*: the crusade has become a manner of class struggle, incarnated in the double lineage of the hero.

Our six examples of dissimulation show, however, that the text does not function to justify the bourgeois portion of his heritage. Rather, the bourgeois characters and their values are consistently duped and ridiculed by means of this device. The only other victims of justified deception are those who refuse to acknowledge the nobility of the hero. As bourgeois heritage fades gradually into the background, the text ultimately reveals its conservative social function, that is to remove the threat of the rising bourgeoisie and preserve the stability of the system. Hence it is partly through the

device of hidden identity that the audience discerns the truly noble identity of Hervis de Mes and his descendants.

Notes

1. See Pauline Taylor, ed., Introduction, *Gerbert de Mez: Chanson de geste du XIIIe siècle* (Namur: Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philosophie et de Lettres de Namur, 1952) XIV; Anne Iker Gittleman, *Le Style épique dans Garin le Loherain* (Geneva: Droz, 1967): 14; Paulin Paris, "Trouvères, chansons de geste," *Histoire littéraire de la France* 22 (Paris: Didot, 1852): 602.
2. See Joël Grisward, review of *Rückzug in epischer Parade* by Alfred Adler, *Cahiers de civilisation Médiévale* 7.4 (1964): 497-504.
3. For a discussion of matrilineal nobility in *Hervis de Mes*, see Alfred Adler, "Hervis de Metz and the Matrilineal Nobility of Champagne," *Romanic Review* 37 (1946): 150-61.
4. All references to *Le Charroi de Nîmes* will be taken from the edition of J.-L. Perrier, *CFMA* 66 (Paris: Champion, 1931).
5. For a discussion of the *vilain* in French epics, see Micheline de Combarieu, "La représentation du vilain dans les chansons de geste (et dans quelques autres textes médiévaux)," *Exclus et systèmes d'exclusion dans la littérature et la civilisation Médiévale*, *Senefiance* 5 (Paris: Champion, 1978).

6. See Jean Charles Payen, "Le *Charroi de Nîmes*, comédie épique?" *Mélanges Jean Frappier*, II, Publications romanes et françaises 112 (Geneva: Droz, 1970): 891-902.
7. Frédéric Hewitt Bateson, ed., *Floovant* (1938; Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1973); Blanche Katz, ed., *La Prise d'Orenges* (Morningside Heights: King's Crown Press, 1947).
8. Pierre Ruelie, ed., *Huon de Bordeaux*, Travaux de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres 20 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France; Bruxelles: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1960).
9. All references to *Hervis de Mes* will be taken from Manuscript E (BN fr. 19160) based on variants of the following edition: Edmund Stengel, ed., *Hervis von*

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*Metz: Vorgedicht der Lotharingergeste nach allen Handschriften zum erstenmal vollständig herausgegeben*, Gesellschaft für romanische Literatur 1 (Dresden: Niemeyer, 1903).