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Journal Title: Connotations.

Volume: 7 **Issue:** 1

Month/Year: 19970101**Pages:** 135-140

Article Author:

Article Title: Berger, 'More than Just a Fashion;
T. H. White's Use of Dress as a Means of
Characterization'

Imprint: Münster ;, New York ; Waxmann, 1991
9999

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More Than Just a Fashion: T. H. White's Use of Dress as a Means of Characterization*

CHRISTIANE BERGER

The discussion of T. H. White's Arthurian novel *The Once and Future King* in *Connotations* drew my attention to this text, and as a medievalist and art historian I was struck by White's abundant use of anachronisms and visual details.¹ He characterizes his protagonists not only through their words and deeds and through the psychological explanations of his narrator but also gives detailed descriptions of their clothes, and I would like to suggest that he uses them as an additional means of characterization by making different stages of psychological development visible.

In his monograph on White John K. Crane points out that White's Arthur is very human in comparison with Malory's Arthur, who is more impressive and impersonal, and that accordingly White gave him "fair hair and a stupid face."² What Crane does not mention is Arthur's royal robe without which the portrayal is incomplete:

Arthur was a young man, just on the threshold of life. He had fair hair and a stupid face, or at any rate there was a lack of cunning in it. It was an open face, with kind eyes and a reliable or faithful expression . . . He had never been unjustly treated, for one thing, so he was kindly to other people. The king was dressed in a robe of velvet which had belonged to Uther the Conqueror, his father, trimmed with the beards of fourteen kings who had been vanquished in the olden days. Unfortunately some of these kings had had red hair, some black, some pepper-and-salt, while their growth of beard had been uneven. The trimming looked like a feather boa. The moustaches were stuck on round the buttons.³

*Reference: Andrew Hadfield, "T. H. White, Pacifism and Violence: The Once and Future Nation," *Connotations* 6.2 (1996/97): 207-26.

The gruesome robe is not T. H. White's invention. In his source, Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, a very similar robe belongs to King Royns of North Wales and Ireland. He had overcome eleven kings and now wants Arthur's beard because he "had purfilde a mantell with kynges berdis, and there lacked one place of the mantell; wherefore he sente for hys bearde, othir ellis he wolde entir his londes and brenne and sle" ⁴ Arthur's answer is that this desire is outrageous and that in addition he is too young to provide a proper beard for the trimming. Malory makes the young king reject this cruel and primitive custom, but later on Arthur is cruel enough to expose his new-born son and other babies because of Merlin's prophecy that his son will destroy him and his realm. White elaborates the robe he found in his source—the moustaches round the buttons are his own fantasy—but he transfers it to Arthur. The grotesque impression of Arthur's royal robe is heightened by the description of his honest and kind face. Unfortunately, at this early stage of his royal career, White's young king Arthur is not above wearing his father's savage trophies, and of course Uther's robe does not suit him because of the humane nobility which shows in his face. Still, being young and naive he does feel the temptations of royal power, and his fight against "the Uther Pendragon touch" will be a life-long exhausting task. ⁵ Both Malory and White depict Arthur as a good character who is capable of cruel deeds, but while Malory achieves this through his narration, White makes it at once visible in Arthur's portrayal.

There is another major male character whom White invests with a grotesque dress, and again, there is an interesting parallel, in this case in Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*.

After the Grail quest, Arthur's court

had 'knowledge of the world' now: it had the fruits of achievement, civilization, savoir-vivre, gossip, fashion, malice, and the broad mind of scandal.

. . . .

Clothes became fantastic. The long toes of Agravaine's slippers were secured by gold chains to garters below his knee, and as for Mordred's toes their chains were secured to a belt round his waist.

. . . .

Mordred wore his ridiculous shoes contemptuously: they were a satire on himself. The court was modern. ⁶

In *Ivanhoe*, Scott ridicules the *dernier cri* of aristocratic fashion when he describes one of the degenerate Norman noblemen, the Prior of Jorvaulx, who belongs to the train of Prince John at the tournament of Ashby:

Fur and gold were not spared in his garments; and the point of his boots, out-heroding the preposterous fashion of the time, turned up so very far, as to be attached, not to his knees merely, but to his very girdle, and effectually prevented him from putting his foot into the stirrup. This, however, was a slight inconvenience to the gallant Abbot, who, perhaps, even rejoicing in the opportunity to display his accomplished horsemanship before so many spectators, especially of the fair sex, dispensed with the use of these supports to a timid rider.⁷

Neither Scott's Abbot nor White's Mordred are simple fashion victims. The sensuous Prior's ridiculous boots give him the opportunity to demonstrate his superb horsemanship. Mordred's attitude, however, is entirely different. He wears his shoes out of contempt, as "a satire on himself." After the tragic death of Gareth, Gawain's brother and Mordred's half-brother, Mordred's vicious mind and political ambition are made manifest in his outward appearance:

Both were in black—but with the strange difference that Mordred was resplendent in his, a sort of Hamlet, while Gawain looked more like the gravedigger. Mordred had begun dressing with this dramatic simplicity since the time when he had become a leader of the popular party. Their aims were some kind of nationalism, with Gaelic autonomy, and a massacre of the Jews as well, in revenge for a mythical saint called Hugh of Lincoln. There were already thousands, spread over the country, who carried his badge of a scarlet fist clenching a whip, and who called themselves Thrashers. About the older man, who only wore the uniform to please his brother, there was a homespun blackness, the true, despairing dark of mourning.⁸

White makes Mordred resemble Hamlet not only because of his dramatic black dress, but also because of his strange relation to his mother and his—in this case definitely real—madness. On the other hand, he is also a fascist whose uniform badge shows an even more aggressive symbol of punishing power than its ancient model, the Roman *fasces*. Finally, Mordred looks like the man he really is, malicious and destructive. In striking contrast to him Arthur, who started his royal career in his

father's savage robe that did not suit him, as a mature man wears his own dignified royal robe, which is a heavy burden:

Finally the trumpets were at the door, and England came. In weighty ermine, which covered his shoulders and the left arm, with a narrower strip down the right—in the blue velvet cloak and overwhelming crown—heavy with majesty and supported, almost literally supported, by the proper officers, the King was led to the throne He sank down where he was put.⁹

Another point of interest is the different function of clothes in the case of Mordred's and Lancelot's madness. Mordred's uniform is a manifestation of his political aims, but at the same time his splendid outward appearance helps to conceal his madness:

. . . he stepped into the room, sumptuous in his black velvet, with one cold diamond beaming in the rushlight from his scarlet badge. Anybody who had not seen him for a month or two would have known at once that he was mad—but his brains had gone so gradually that those who lived with him had failed to see it.¹⁰

In comparison with Mordred's precious dress and seemingly composed behaviour after he has gone mad Lancelot's madness is of another kind: he is a raving maniac, a naked "Wild Man" almost reduced to the state of an animal:

A Wild Man . . . was being run through Corbin by the villagers who had once gone out to welcome Lancelot. He was naked, as thin as a ghost, and he ran along with his hands over his head, to protect it.

. . . .

King Pelles could clearly see the blood running over his high cheekbones, and the sunken cheeks, and the hunted eyes, and the blue shadows between his ribs.¹¹

King Pelles, after having tried in vain to find out whether the madman is Lancelot, keeps the "dummy" as his jester locked in the pigeon house, in comic clothes. A few days later, when the king's nephew is knighted and Pelles presents a new gown to everybody during the celebration, he orders the fool to be fetched from his pigeon house:

Sir Lancelot was fetched from the pigeon house, for the royal favour. He stood still in the torchlight with some straws in his beard, a pitiful figure in his jester's patch-work.

'Pore fool,' said the King sadly. 'Pore fool. Here, have mine.' / And, in spite of all remonstrances and advices to the contrary, King Pelles struggled out of his costly robe, which he popped over Lancelot's head.

....

Sir Lancelot, standing upright in the grand dress, looked strangely stately in the Great Hall. If only his beard had been trimmed . . . if only he had not starved away to a skeleton in the cell of the poor hermit after the boar hunt—if only he had not been rumoured to be dead—but, even as it was, a sort of awe came into the Hall. The King did not notice it. With measured tread Sir Lancelot walked back to his pigeon loft, and the house carls made an avenue for him as he went.¹²

The compassionate but drunken King Pelles cannot understand what his stately robe does to Sir Lancelot: the Wild Man might have looked ridiculous in it, but in spite of his terrible condition the robe suits him because of his innate nobility. This is the first step towards his recovery, towards the restoration of his self-respect and dignity:

Lancelot was stretched out in his knightly gown. Sir Bliant, in remarking that gentlemanly things seemed to stir something in his head, had noticed truly. Moved by the gown, by some strange memory of miniver and colour, the poor Wild Man had gone from the King's table to the well. There, alone in the darkness, without a mirror, he had washed / his face. He had swilled out his eye sockets with bony knuckles. With a currycomb and a pair of shears from the stables he had tried to arrange his hair.¹³

White's version of this episode is more dramatic than Malory's, because he stresses Lancelot's own struggle to regain his dignified appearance, while in Malory's version he has been taken care of by others. The dramatic effect of the robe on Sir Lancelot is White's addition to his source.¹⁴ He also stresses the fact that nakedness is not necessarily humiliating. Earlier in his life, when Lancelot realized that he had been seduced by Elaine "his ugly face took on a look of profound and outraged sorrow, so simple and truthful that his nakedness in the windowlight was dignity."¹⁵

Elizabeth Brewer in her recent monograph on White states that "White . . . sees history as a series of transformations and changes, taking the form of a long struggle out of barbarism towards order, justice and

tolerance, a slow process of gradual achievement which is ever in danger of / being reversed by the return of chaos."¹⁶ White's detailed descriptions of his protagonists' clothes serve to make this process visible.

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NOTES

¹See Elizabeth Brewer, T. H. White's *The Once and Future King* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993) 18-19, 188, 191.

²John K. Crane, T. H. White (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1974) 88.

³Terence Hanbury White, *The Once and Future King* (Glasgow: Fontana / Collins, 1980) 217.

⁴Eugène Vinaver (ed.), *The Works of Sir Thomas Malory*, 3rd ed. rev. by P. J. C. Field (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) 1:54.

⁵White 221-22.

⁶White 474.

⁷Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe*, ed. with an introduction by Ian Duncan (Oxford: OUP, 1996) 92.

⁸White 590-91.

⁹White 595.

¹⁰White 609.

¹¹White 400.

¹²White 401-02.

¹³White 403-04.

¹⁴See Vinaver 2:823-24. Here, Lancelot's madness is healed by the power of the grail.

¹⁵White 372.

¹⁶Brewer 199-200.