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The Non-Human Agency of a Thing in *Orendel or The Grey Robe*

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An emerging research consensus on *Orendel or the Grey Robe* has begun to consider the seamless tunic of Christ to be of central importance for this text, and to suggest that the narrative should be considered a thing biography of this robe rather than as a bridal quest epic focusing on a human protagonist. This article furthers this interpretation by analyzing the way in which the narrative suggests that the robe as a protagonist has a kind of agency that is not that of a pseudo-human subject, but of an inanimate thing: through giving it the role of a character in the narrative, putting it in a grammatically and semantically active position, and blurring the distinction between robe and wearer. This non-anthropocentric notion of agency can refine contemporary new materialist understandings of the agency of things.

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Die neuere Forschung zu *Orendel oder Der Graue Rock* misst dem ungenähten Rock Christi eine zentrale Rolle in der Handlung bei und schlägt vor, die Erzählung als Dingbiographie des Grauen Rocks statt als Brautwerbungsepos um den menschlichen Protagonisten Orendel zu verstehen. Dieser Beitrag analysiert genauer, wie der Text dem Rock dabei eine Handlungsfähigkeit zuschreibt, die nicht die eines pseudo-menschlichen Subjekts ist, sondern die eines unbelebten Dinges: durch Zuschreibung einer Protagonist*innenrolle, einer grammatisch wie semantisch aktiven Rolle und durch die Überblendung von Rock und Träger. Diese nicht-anthropozentrische Auffassung von Handlungsfähigkeit kann zeitgenössische Theoriediskurse in der Materialitätsforschung anregen.

1. Agency of material things

Public and academic conceptions of agency are currently undergoing a major shift. The view of agency as the sole preserve of humans, which has dominated modern western thought since Descartes, is challenged by recent events such as the climate emergency and the Coronavirus pandemic. We are increasingly forced to acknowledge the impact of large-scale global geological forces on the one hand and of small-scale viruses, microparticles and pollutants on the other. Thinkers such as Sara Ahmed, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Serenella Iovino and Bruno Latour are proposing non-anthropocentric models of agency that no longer rely on the separation of agential human subjects from passive material objects.[1] In this context, medievalists have brought into play models of agency that predate the modern subject/object-division.[2] Pre-Enlightenment concepts of agency in ancient and medieval thought, devotion, art, literature and culture can inspire contemporary conceptions of non-human agency, and in turn can be better understood with the help of the new theoretical concepts.

Literature in particular shows that the separation of the world into matter without agency on the one hand and humans with agency on the other depends on a culturally specific rather than pre-given distinction of matter

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1   See, for example, Ahmed 2019, Barad 2007, Bennett 2010, Iovino 2015, Latour 2005. – Special thanks to the editors and contributors of <u>MEMO 7 (2020) "Textual Thingness"</u>, who generously helped me access the relevant literature during the 2020 lockdown due to the Coronavirus pandemic, and to the peer-reviewer for helpful comments.

2   See, for example, Steel 2017, Cohen 2015.

from agency, intentionality, consciousness, mind and language.[3] This binary is not pre-given in reality and then merely represented in literature, but it only emerges through and in language as a cultural construct. Medieval literature is fascinated by its own powers to create worlds, and to define exactly how language and fiction works to achieve this, without perceiving language as immaterial in the way that modern thought does. Many medieval narratives understand stories to be material phenomena working through the matter of parchment and voice to create ways of seeing the material world, rather than as reducible to their abstract content.[4] They are intensely interested both in materiality as a concept and in concrete material things.[5] They often tell "thing biographies": stories that follow the path of an inanimate thing rather than that of a human protagonist.[6] These stories are frequently embedded in longer works, as is the case in the German language with the biography of the grail from its arrival on earth to being guarded by the grail king in Wolfram's *Parzival*, or the history of Turnus' ring from gift to cause for revenge in Heinrich of Veldeke's *Aeneid*, or the tale of the Nibelung treasure from being hidden in a mountain to being sunk in the Rhine in *The Song of the Nibelungs*.[7] In other narratives, the thing is a protagonist throughout the text, as in the adventurous afterlife of the seamless tunic that Christ wore during the passion told in *Orendel or the Grey Robe*, or in the journey of a coin from ore through fifty or so different human owners to being lost and found again in Hans Sachs' *Of the Lost Talking Gulden*, or of a horse hide from belonging to a much-abused horse to being flayed and tanned, and then cut and sewn into shoes in Sachs'

The Poor Complaining Horse-Hide.[8] All these inanimate things exert forms of agency that are inseparable from their narrative presentation.

In the following, I shall show how the agency of a thing can be conceptualized in just one of these stories, *Orendel or the Grey Robe*. The eponymous robe here shows agency in three senses: the narrative agency of having its own story and a trajectory; the agency ascribed to it in ambiguous phrases that hint at self-propelled movement without veering into the supernatural; and the related agency of ambiguous formulations that blur the garment and its human wearer, leaving it open whether it is the human or the robe that acts. My focus on agency in *Orendel* not only shows a way of conceptualizing agency beyond the subject/object divide that can inspire contemporary models, but also offers a productive way of reading this much-misunderstood text.

2. Orendel or the Grey Robe

The long history of research on *Orendel or the Grey Robe* is at a crucial stage insofar as a new consensus is emerging that challenges the previously agreed basic philological and literary parameters such as name, date, genre, quality and topic of this text. W. P. Ker summarized the prevailing view of this text in 1897 as "a confused and rambling story, belonging to one of the lowest orders of medieval romance, the hack-work of professional minstrels".[9] Sharing this position, scholarship was for a long time mostly concerned with explaining away the many conspicuous contradictions and repetitions in the plot and wording of the narrative. From the nineteenth century to the 1980s, scholars did so by creating for this and similar texts a genre called 'minstrel epics' that was allegedly composed by under-educated travelling minstrels in the twelfth century, who combined older oral tales in an amateurish fashion. As Rabea Kohnen has shown, researchers then aimed to reconstruct cohesive older heroic sagas on which it presumed the extant text was based, often with nation-

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3   Bildhauer 2020b, pp. 62–63.
4   Cf. Lieb 2005, Ott 2015.
5   Medievalists have predominantly been interested in the latter. Important publications on medieval German literature are Christ 2015, Mühlherr 2016, Wernli/Kling 2018. On notions of materiality, see, e.g., Bynum 2011, Cohen 2015, Robertson 2017, Steel 2017.
6   The term "thing biography" was introduced by Kopytoff 1986 for an academic account of a thing's provenance and use, and is beginning to be occasionally used for literary narratives.
7   For more on these narratives, see Bildhauer 2020b, which also contains an earlier version of the argument presented in this article.

8   Sachs 1870a and 1870b.
9   Ker 1897, p. 289.

alistic motivations of finding Germanic or Norse pagan mythologies or traces of an indigenous folk literature.[10] From the 1980s to the 2000s, academics renamed the 'minstrel epic' as 'bridal-quest epic', because no evidence had been found that professional minstrels might have composed these texts. Researchers now explained the plot contradictions and repetitions as a result not so much of a mixture of oral sagas, but of an amalgamation of the bride-winning plot with devotional genres such as narratives concerned with the translation of relics.[11] These research trends parallel the approach to the most famous example of a medieval German text that does not follow modern expectation of plot coherence, *The Song of the Nibelungs*, where similar ruptures were explained through its postulated assemblage from older oral tales or from a mixture of genres.[12]

For the past fifteen years or so, scholarship has begun to move on from the parameters shaped in the nineteenth century, beginning with the very title by which the text was known, *Orendel*. This title emphasizes the heroic human protagonist of the text, a figure believed to have its roots in Germanic mythology, but none of the surviving medieval and early modern copies of the text use this title. Academics such as Christian Kiening, Sarah Bowden and Sebastian Winkelsträter are now calling the epic more properly by a short version of the title that it gives itself and that puts a thing rather than a human at the centre, namely *Der Graue Rock* (*The Grey Robe*).[13] I here call it the *Orendel or the Grey Robe* to maximize recognition and searchability by acknowledging both the traditional and the more appropriate title.

Most philologists in addition no longer aim to date and reconstruct the "original" text, but have resigned themselves to working with the surviving copies, in line with a general trend in medieval studies. The only extant copies are one 1512 print by Hans Froschauer in Augsburg, as well as one nineteenth-century transcription of a now-lost manuscript from 1477, despite

some surviving earlier references to the hero Orendel and to a book named after him.[14] The dating of the text to the late twelfth century that dominated older research has been thoroughly debunked by Kohnen.[15] There is still no critical edition meeting contemporary standards,[16] and scholars work with a mixture of the existing problematic editions, the nineteenth-century transcription or the 1512 print. I here follow the 1512 print as the oldest extant document.

Academics have crucially also begun to accept the contradictions as part of the design rather than of amateurish accidents in *Orendel or the Grey Robe*, again following parallel trends in research on *The Song of the Nibelungs*. Kiening points out that *Orendel or the Grey Robe* is interested not only in syntagmatic relations that gel into a linear narrative, but also in paradigmatic repetition and assemblages that he compares to the weaving of the titular garment. Winkelsträter has likewise suggested that the text follows the narrative logic of bricolage, of creating the story as a material artwork similar to the robe itself. In this context, the robe itself has attracted more attention, building on the work of several scholars who detail the relevance of the historical context, often from the local perspective of Trier, where an ancient garment believed to be this robe has been kept as a relic since 1196, but was only rediscov-

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10   Kohnen 2014, pp. 7–12.
11   E. g., Kofler 2010, Schulz 2002, Gantert 1999.
12   Cf. Lienert 2017.
13   Winkelsträter 2020; Bowden 2012; Bowden 2011; Kiening 2009, translated in a modified version as Kiening 2019, pp. 231–258.

14   Manuscript H, dated 1477 and burned in the nineteenth century (Strassbourg Stadtbibliothek Cod. B92), is extant in a handwritten copy of 1818 by Christian Moritz Engelhart for Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen (Berlin, SB, Ms. Germ. 4º 817a) and a partial handwritten copy by Jacob Grimm (Berlin, SB, Ms. Germ. 4º 894). The print verse version D, printed by Hans Froschauer in Augsburg (1512), is extant as Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, 4º P. o. germ. 161ⁿ, and further in a handwritten copy by Auguste Brentano, made before 1810, in possession of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm (Berlin, SB, Ms. Germ. 2º 909⁸). The Froschauer print is available in facsimile in Denecke 1972, and also in the digital collection of Bayerische Staatsbibliothek via http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/bsb00009164/image_1. There is also a prose rewriting of the text, P, also dating from 1512, printed by Hanns Othmar in Augsburg and surviving in three copies. For a summary of the transmission, see Miedema 2016.
15   Kohnen 2014, pp. 13–28.
16   There are two editions based on more than one source: Steinger 1935 and Berger 1888. There are also two other nineteenth-century versions: von der Hagen 1844, mostly relying on the transcript by Engelhart of the 1477 manuscript; and a heavily rewritten and stanzaic version: Ettmüller 1858. All editions heavily normalize the text and use conjectures. For an overview of these versions, see Denecke 1972, pp. 1–15.

ered and exhibited there for the first time in 1512 by Emperor Maximilian I.[17] Bowden specifically considers the text to provide a visual recreation of the robe at the time when it was still inaccessible. Winkelsträter has introduced the idea of *Orendel or the Grey Robe* as an "object biography" telling the story of the grey robe.

I will here follow this emerging new approach and probe more deeply into the possibility of considering the robe an agential protagonist. Winkelsträter, Kiening and Bowden see the robe as a protagonist for the start of the tale, but all argue that then Orendel takes over. I suggest here that Orendel is so inextricably linked to the robe that it is useful to flip this perception and see the robe not as an extension of the human, but the human as an extension of the robe insofar as any agency that Orendel shows here is not ontologically different from the agency of the robe. In other words, the robe is a character in the story in much the same way that Orendel is.

In the following, I will investigate exactly how the robe gains a form of agency in the text that is not that of human subject, but that of a thing; and how Orendel's agency in turn is relativized as lacking some of the full intentionality often associated with human agencies. This entails attention to the inconsistencies both in the overall plot and in the grammatical structure of individual sentences, which are vital to allowing for the possibility that the robe has agency. *Orendel or the Grey Robe* in this reading gives its recipients the pleasure of following a thing's 'life' full of adventures and excitement, rather than tracing the linear progression of a human protagonist. It allows recipients the joy and intellectual challenge of experiencing a different logic from the binary cleft of passive object and active human protagonist, and makes sense if we see it as exploring a notion of agency that includes things without ever gelling into a dogmatic definition.

3. Narrative agency as trajectory

The fact that the robe, not Orendel, was seen to be at the heart of the tale is suggested even by the 1512 print's title page, which features a woodcut centering the robe accompanied by the following title:

> *Ein hübsche Histori zu lesen. von vnsers herren rock wie der wunderbarlich einem künig (Orendel genant) worden ist. Der in gen Trier pracht hat. vnd da selbst in ein sarch verschlossen. Der yetz bey kayser Maximilians zeit erfunden ist.* (fol. 1r)

> (A Courtly Story for Reading About Our Lord's Robe, how miraculously it came to belong to a king (called Orendel), who brought it to Trier and there enclosed it in a sarcophagus, which has now been rediscovered in Emperor Maximilian's time.)

The title is in itself a condensed thing biography, recounting key points of the robe's story and bringing it up to the present day of the rediscovery of a relic in a Trier altar.[18] The first 150 of 3,900 verses of the text indeed consist of a succinct account of the robe's travels. This gives the robe quasi-human status and the impression that it has its own trajectory by simply following its path, rather than that of Orendel. We first hear that St Helen fashions the robe from wool that the Virgin Mary had spun. It is woven as one piece that is not sewn together and cannot be fastened or taken apart. Christ then wears it during his fasting in the desert and also on the cross. After the crucifixion, an old Jewish man is given the robe by Herod in return for his services. He takes it away and

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17   See, for example, Gantert 1999, Embach 1995, Meves, 1975.

18   The expanded prose version P makes even clearer that the central subject, which justifies the print at this time, is the relic. The title begins "Of the Inseparable Seamless Robe of Our Lord Jesus Christ", and then lists major stations of its journey from being made by Mary, given by Pilate to a Jewish man to ending up with Orendel, who enclosed him in a sarcophagus in Trier. This is linked explicitly to its rediscovery in 1512 and the present tense of the writing: Denecke 1972, vol. 1, p. P 1.: "*Von dem vntrenlichen vngenaeten Rock vnsers herren Jesu Christi*".

washes it, but on Christ's orders the blood-stains do not wash out. Having witnessed this, Herod wants the robe out of sight; and it is hidden in a stone sarcophagus, which the Jewish man drives 72 miles out to sea and throws it into the water. But a merman breaks the sarcophagus and swims with the robe for three days to a beach in a different land, where the robe hides for eight years. In the ninth year, the robe resurfaces and a pilgrim finds it on the beach. When the blood stains once more do not come out, he recognizes it as Christ's and therefore too valuable to be worn by humans, and throws it back into the sea. A whale swallows it at once and carries it in his stomach for another eight years, until Orendel catches the whale and finds the robe.

The fact that the text's attention stays with the robe rather than with the humans who handle it is enough to give the impression that the robe moves from one place to the other. Though it cannot self-propel, which would be a supernatural or quasi-human kind of agency, it changes location due to its interaction with humans, with the sea, the merman and the whale. As Winkelsträter has indicated, it can usefully be understood as a "wandering thing", a term coined by Michael Niehaus for a thing that features prominently in a range of stories and films:

> [D]as wandernde Ding ist eben nicht dasselbe wie das von Hand zu Hand gehende Ding. Es geht nicht auf in den Akten, die Subjekte mit ihm vollziehen können, weil es einen *eigenen Weg* hat. Aus der Sicht der Geschichte, in der das wandernde Ding figuriert, ist es das Ding selbst, das wandert. Mag es auch den Besitzer oder den Eigentümer wechseln, aus der Sicht der Geschichte wird es niemandem gehört haben. Es ist, gleichsam als *Subjekt der Geschichte*, mehr als nur Objekt und gehört – wie alles, was wandert – nur sich selbst.[19]

(The wandering thing is just not the same as the thing passing from hand to hand. It is not summed up by the acts that subjects can carry out with it, because it has *its own path*. From the perspective of the story in which the wandering thing features, it is the thing itself that wanders. May it change owners or holders, from the perspective of the story it will have belonged to nobody. It is, as the *subject of the story* (as it were), more than just an object and belongs, like everything that wanders, only to itself.)

Niehaus suggests that the movement and trajectory of such a wandering thing cannot satisfactorily be represented in terms of the binary distinction between motile subject and static object. While he uses the term 'subject' in opposition to 'object' of possession, and firmly denies that a thing can ever have agency, his phrase gains an additional resonance in English translation: a thing, when not in possession of a human in the course of a plot, also often becomes the subject of the story in the sense of its subject matter, topic and focus. This is the case for the robe here: it can neither propel itself as a human subject would, with the plot tracing its movements, nor is it a passive object incidental to the humans' movements that are the story's focus. Its trajectory as the focal point of a temporal sequence – the subject matter of the story – gives it instead a form of agency that is beyond the subject/object binary.

The one case of self-propelled movement is the very moment when the robe removes itself from circulation after the first few days of floating in the sea with the merman: "*Er barg sich also werde/Neun klafftern tieff vnder die erden*" ("it hid itself nine klafters deep under the sea", fol. 4r). To hide oneself is a self-propelled movement not normally allowed to inanimate things, so this would be a supernatural occurrence. It is significant that this is a movement aimed at hiding. Niehaus points out that a thing often seems to exert the greatest agency at the stages of a narrative when it does not belong to anyone, as the robe is here:

> Am unmittelbarsten Subjekt der Geschichte und damit unser Ding ist das wandernde Ding, wenn es für niemanden ein Objekt ist – wenn es

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19 Niehaus 2009, p. 391, emphasis in original, cf. pp. 393, 395. For other explorations of narratively constituted forms of agency, see Iovino 2015, Ahmed 2019, esp. pp. 21–67.

verloren oder vergessen ist und wiedergefunden oder wieder gefunden werden muss.[20]

(A wandering thing is most immediately the subject of a story and thus of concern to us if it is nobody's object – if it is lost or forgotten and needs to be rediscovered or found again).

When a thing at a certain point in the plot is not immediately in the possession of a human owner, it is evident that it is not a mere object in the possession of a human subject, and may be closer to having such subject status itself. Escaping the merman is the point at which the robe removes itself from circulation for eight years, so that it seems no longer a mere object. The choice of words "hiding itself" fits in with this exceeding of the object status.[21]

The same oscillation between the passivity of an inanimate object on the one hand and the active movement and directional change we might expect of a human protagonist on the other characterizes the trajectory of the robe overall. It does not follow a linear path, leading straightforwardly from Christ to its destined new owner Orendel, but has several unsuitable owners. The doubling of the eight-year hidden period – first under the beach and then in the whale – in particular indicates that the robe's path is one of repetition rather than linearity. We may suspect that due to its status as a relic, this wandering thing's path may ultimately turn out to have been pre-ordained by God, and many interpreters have understood it in this way, but the text does not state that here. This is, moreover, a non-progressive trajectory insofar as the robe does not develop or change, as modern conceptions of narrative would expect a human protagonist to do. Its immutability is emphasized in the plot: it remains intact despite being buried, sunk and eaten; weapons cannot penetrate it; its stains cannot be washed out; and it is returned to a perfect state

when Orendel acquires it. The opposite possibility, the disintegration of the fabric, is sketched as an alternative trajectory that is quickly averted when the right person wears it, as we shall see below. Nor does this trajectory have a clear destination: while the robe ends up being deposited in Trier, the story does not end there, but continues with Orendel's exploits and a brief ending reporting his death, while the title page extends the robe's story into the present day.

The corollary of this increased narrative agency of the thing is a diminished narrative agency of humans. Humans try to wash the robe twice and depose of it twice without success: the robe remains stained and returns to shore in each case. The limited human agency is particularly clear in the main part of the narrative, in which the convoluted trajectory of the robe becomes intertwined with that of King Orendel of Trier. After the introductory report of the robe's trajectory, the text moves focus by following Orendel's attempt to win Queen Bride of Jerusalem as his wife. This bridal quest merges with his mission to defend Bride's kingdom and especially the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem against the so-called 'heathens' (*heiden*), a derogatory term used consistently in this text for non-Christians, most of whom appear to be Muslim. What actually happens though is that Orendel is as little in control of his trajectory as the robe was. Similar to the robe itself, Orendel is shipwrecked on his way to Jerusalem and washed up on a beach, where he is found by a fisher-king called Ise. The two go fishing together, and when Ise cuts open one of the fish they caught, it turns out to be the whale with the grey robe in its stomach.[22] Even after Orendel has found and claimed the robe, his intended journeys are still thwarted by another shipwreck, by repeated 'heathen' attacks and by the interventions of Ise and of divine messengers. These external impulses that force Orendel's movements occur with almost comical frequency, highlighting that Orendel is not an agential protagonist forging his own path.

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20   Niehaus 2009, p. 394.
21   In Sachs' tale *Of the Lost Talking Gulden* (1870b), there is a similar point where the eponymous coin also makes its own self-propelled movement and ducks down, precisely when it is lost and no longer an object of possession, cf. Bildhauer 2020a and Bildhauer 2020b, pp. 106–107.

22   As Alev Tekinay has suggested, a source for the particular motif of the Grey Robe swallowed by a whale and found in its belly might be not just the Old Testament story of Jonah and the whale, but also another thing biography, the widely known narrative of Solomon's ring that gives the wearer huge powers, which is likewise swallowed by a fish and then rediscovered in its stomach: Tekinay 1980.

The agency in Orendel's journey cannot be ascribed to either the robe or Orendel or God. New materialists are often misunderstood as arguing that things have quasi-human agency and of simply transposing a cause-and-effect logic onto things. While the robe cannot walk or talk or think like a human, or cause the events in the plot, it is also not passive or static. The narrative here proceeds by a different logic that is typical of premodern literature and that German-speaking historical narratologists are currently aiming to define.[23] Agreement so far has been reached only on the fact that models that rely on human intentional action as creating causal, psychologically plausible links in the plot are inadequate. What my reading of *Orendel or the Grey Robe* contributes is the insistence that characters in a narrative – one of the ways in which connections are created – do not necessarily have to be human. The narrative thread can follow a thing as much as a human, contrary to what narratologists usually assume.[24] This does not entail importing the notion of intentional agency and causation onto things, on the contrary, it relativises Orendel's human agency. Nor does it mean that *Orendel or the Grey Robe* should be read simply as a legend or relic translation narrative rather than as a bride-winning quest. Assembling what we hear about the robe and about Orendel into a biography is only one of the options offered to readers as part of the pleasurable literary experience of stretching their mental horizons. Creating a narrative trajectory does not get rid of the contradictions and ambiguities in its description. Another is to acknowledge the contradictory information we receive about the robe and to hold it in our minds as a thing that is somewhere between active and passive, and both identical to and distinguished from its wearer, as I will show in more detail in the following two sections.

4. Middle voice: potential for distributed agency in the wording

The suspension of the robe between agential subject and passive object is evident not only as regards the overall plot development, but also in the wording of its movements. In some phrases, human subjects, the merman or the whale clearly act upon the robe as a direct object, picking it up and moving it about, as is the standard way of conveying agency grammatically.[25] In the phrase quoted above, on the other hand, the robe appears as the grammatical and semantic subject of hiding. More often, the careful phrasing suggests some kind of middle voice between active and passive, to use Bruno Latour's term.[26]

Many constructions put the robe in the position of the grammatical subject, which emphasizes its role even if it is not semantically active, and often means that no human agent is mentioned. The robe is the grammatical subject of verbs in the passive mode: "*er ward gewürcket*" ("it was fashioned", fol. 2v) is repeated with the intensity of an incantation four times; it "*ward verwürcket*" ("was hidden", fol. 4v) in the stone sarcophagus. In a further step towards greater agency the robe occurs as the grammatical subject of verbs that can express varying degrees of agency and self-propelled movement. The phrase used to describe the resurfacing on the beach is that it "*kam* [...] *herwider auff die erde*" ("came back onto the earth", fol. 4v). In both Middle High German and modern English, the verb 'to come' can imply self-propelled, intentional movement ("I'll come to yours"), which in the case of an inanimate object like the robe would be supernatural. "To come" can, however, also refer to an arrival or appearance of inanimate objects that does not necessitate motility ("spring is coming"). A similar broad range of agency is covered by the verb "to

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23 For a summary, see for example, Schneider 2019.
24 On the standard narratological definitions see Lienert 2020, p. 5, and Bildhauer 2020b, p. 14, both with further references.

25 The Jewish man who gets the robe from Herod, for example, "picked up the robe and carried it away" ("*huob auff den rock vnd truog in von dan*", fol. 3v), the pilgrim "lifted it from the sand" ("*Zuckte* [...] *in von dem sande*", fol. 5r) and the whale "swallowed the robe into his stomach" ("*verschlandt den rock in seinen magen*", fol. 5v). Christ is clearly identified as the cause behind the fact that the bloodstains do not wash out: "Our lord ordered this" ("*Unser herre das gebot*", fol. 5r).
26 Latour 2010, pp. 56–59.

become", as used in the title, "*der einem künig worden ist*" ("it became a king's"). Rather than casting the human as a grammatical subject and semantic agent ("the king bought it") or using a passive construction that shifts the grammatical focus onto the robe while leaving the semantical agency with the human ("it was bought by the king"), the phrase "it became a king's" puts the robe in the grammatical subject position without it needing any supernatural ability to act. Much like fantastical narratives in Tzvetan Todorov's definition leave open if there is a supernatural or a rational explanation for the plot, these wordings leave open the possibility of thingly movement without enforcing it.[27]

Orendel's eventual purchase of the robe does not follow human rules of trade but is determined by the robe and God as grammatical subjects and semantic agents, too. When Orendel acquires the robe, the robe features as the grammatical subject of an ergative verb, that is, a verb that can be used with a direct object ("I tear my shirt") but does not have to have any object ("the shirt tears"):

> *Wo man den roc an greyff,*
> *wie fast er auß ainander schleyff*
> *In allen den geperden,*
> *Als er faul were.* (fol. 17r–17v)

(Wherever one touches the robe, it tears apart so quickly in all its features as if it were rotten.)

This phrasing gives the impression of an agency that is close to that of a human who is able to tear an object. As soon as Orendel takes it, the verb "become" is again used with the robe as a grammatical and semantic subject capable of change, as emphasized by the grammatically unusual inclusion of a reflexive pronoun:

> *Do ward sich an der stunde*
> *Der rock nagel neüe*
> *In allen den geperden*
> *Als ob er erst von dem tuoch kommen were.* (fol. 17v)

(Then at once the robe became (itself) brand new in all features, as if it had just come from whole cloth.)

In another sentence of this passage, God is the semantic agent and grammatical subject, locating the ultimate agency with him: "*Do thet unser herr grosse zaichen*" ("there our lord worked great signs", fol. 17r). The robe's role in this process is again expressed in a "middle voice" that allows it to do things in the sense of being a grammatical subject of verbs of change and motion, without being accredited with motility or any other supernatural agency.

The same middle voice is used of the text itself at the beginning: "*Nu wil ich mir selber beginnen/ Vnd wil von dem hayligen grawen rock singen*" ("Now I want to start myself and will sing of the holy grey robe", fol. 2v). The "I" in this sentence could be interpreted on the one hand as a human narrator, as might be conventionally expected. In that case, however, the reflexive dative pronoun "mir selber" would be grammatically and semantically superfluous. The first person pronoun could instead be understood as referring to the text itself: "now I want to start *myself*". This would be grammatically somewhat smoother, but more unusual semantically, though things also figure as speakers in other medieval German literary texts such as Wirnt of Grafenberg's *Wigalois* or Dietrich of the Glezze's *Der Borte*. So the phrasing again is ambiguous and leaves open if the grammatical subject and the semantic agent is a human or a thing or both.[28]

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27   Todorov 1975, pp. 24–56.

28   The ending of the 1477 manuscript also contains the line: "Here the Grey Robe has an end" ("*Hie hat der Grog Rock ein ende*"). This similarly leaves open if the label 'the grey robe' refers to the text or to the human character who has just died in the plot, or to both.

5. The robe's agency as blended with that of a human subject in the wording

The blurring of wandering thing and wandering human, however, goes much further. Instead of being owned by Orendel, the grey robe merges with Orendel, insofar as the name 'the Grey Robe' now refers not only to the garment, but also to its human wearer. After Orendel has taken his leave from Ise and made his way to the Holy Sepulchre, as is briefly reported, he is addressed by a passer-by as 'Sir Grey Robe' because the other man does not know his name:

> *GOt gruoß euch herr grawer rock*
> *Ich kan euch nit anders genennen wayß got*
> *Ob ich euch herr nun erkante*
> *wie gerne ich euch anders nante*
> *Der was der allererste man*
> *Der dem künig Orendel seinen namen benam*
> *Fürbaß hieß man in nit anders dann den grawen rock.* (fol. 19v)

("God may greet you, Sir Grey Robe. God knows I can't call you anything else. If I recognized you, Sir, I would gladly call you something else." This was the very first man to take King Orendel's name away; from then on, he was called only the Grey Robe.)

The narrator and all the human characters now indeed exclusively call him 'the Grey Robe', for example: "*Do sprach der grawe rock*", "*Der grawe rock … in den satel sprang*", "*Der grawe rock sich buckte/ Die grossen schuoch er ab zuckte*" ("the Grey Robe said", fol. 21r; "the Grey Robe leapt into the saddle", fol. 22r; "the Grey Robe bent down and took off the big shoes", fol. 22v). A large section of the narrative (about a thousand verses) now follows the Grey Robe as he defends the Holy Sepulchre against 'heathen' attacks and wins Bride as his wife. Later, he returns to Westphalia and Trier, where he deposits the robe itself in a sarcophagus, but continues to carry its name until his death, with which the narrative ends.

As regards the agency of things, the startling effect that phrases such as those just quoted retain until the end suggests that part of the point is here defamiliarization, the introduction of the notion of a speaking, moving, horse-riding, fighting garment. A crucial condition for this to work is that both *der rock* ("the robe") and "Orendel" are grammatically masculine in German, so that both would normally be referred to as "he" (*er*) anyway. English would enforce a use of differentiating pronouns (either "it" or "he") and thus not allow for this grammatical slippage between human and thing. Insofar as human and thing are still separable, this avoids becoming supernatural: logically, it is still the human subject who acts here, as interpreters so far have highlighted.[29] As regards human agency, however, this referential merging of Orendel with a thing relativises the special status we usually ascribe to humans. The fact that "the Grey Robe" becomes Orendel, moreover, means that the impression is created that the tunic itself gains human agency, insofar as "the Grey Robe" (a name that here refers to the human, but that would normally refer to the tunic) acts, speaks and perceives, gets married and has spectacular fights.

Beyond the blurring of human and thing, the fact that both are called "The Grey Robe" highlights the function of the grey robe as a name, irrespective of its real-world referent. Both man and thing are ultimately revealed to be linguistic constructions here. The narratedness of the text is also stressed forcefully through its clunky rhymes that draw attention to themselves, its frequent blunt metanarrative comments about its sources and listeners, and the fact that many phrases and even long passages are repeated verbatim not always in logical order. This, as Kiening and Winkelsträter have convincingly argued, reminds recipients constantly that they are reading or hearing a narrative poem which is as much an artfully made artefact as the robe itself.

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29 Kohnen 2014, p. 96, analyses further instances where it is not clear if "the Grey Robe" means the human or the thing or both. Winkelsträter 2020 observes a similar blending of robe and Christ at the start of the narrative (p. 153) and of the giant Metwin and a statue on his own helmet (pp. 162–3). A similar merging of human and things has been observed in other medieval texts, e.g., by Bigalke 2016.

6. Conclusion

By making the object Grey Robe semantically merge with a person, the story gives the relic the most adventurous biography possible, and in this way extends as well as undermines a typical relic translation narrative.[30] Some of the pleasure of the story for recipients is this experimenting with what a thing might do, and working out the rules of the text: how much can a thing do without this violating the rule of the story-world in which it does not have quasi-human powers? This includes a notion of thingly agency that does not mirror that of a human, or simply borrows it from its wearer, as previous scholarship has suggested. It is instead the agency that comes with having one's story told, with escaping human possession, with governing verbs and with becoming grammatically and semantically blended with a human.

Aside from its value for Orendel scholarship and medievalist scholarship more broadly, attention to the robe's agency contributes to recent theories of agential things by emphasizing the usefulness of a literary approach. Understanding the functioning of narrative with narratological tools has allowed me to demonstrate that the mere role of the robe as a protagonist is enough to give it some "narrative agency". Detailed stylistic analysis has allowed me to show how different grammatical constructions can open up ambiguity that allow for a blending of human and thing through language, and for a middle voice that can express something between (or different from) object passivity and human agency. This is not just a way of representing an existing world, this is a way of conceiving the world from which new materialism and other current theories may well draw inspiration.

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30   For translation narratives, see Geary 1978, Heinzelmann 1979; for the power of relics more generally see, e.g., Bynum 1995, Bynum 2011, Kiening 2009, Weitbrecht 2016.

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