Introduction: Imagining the Text

Wer hat mich guoter uf getan?
Si ez ieman der mich kan
Beidiu lesen und verstên,
Der sol gnade an mir begên...

(What good man has opened me? If it be someone who can both read me and understand me, then he will do right by me...)

Wirnt von Gravenberg, Wigalois

... ...

And when he told them of the blue periwinkles, the red poppies in the yellow wheat, and the green leaves of the berry bush, they saw the colors as clearly as if they had been painted in their minds.

Leo Lionni, Frederick

... ...

Wigalois and Ekphrasis

Toward the end of Wirnt von Gravenberg's thirteenth-century romance Wigalois, there is a splendid wedding celebration. The hero Gwigalois has defeated the heathen and devil’s accomplice Roaz and restored order to the Kingdom of Korntin. Now he is marrying the princess Larie. Then, in the middle of the festivities, the newlyweds receive terrible news: a messenger comes and explains that one of the bride’s relatives has been attacked and murdered on his


3 In the manuscripts, the hero’s name appears as Gwigalois, not Wigalois. This is explained as “Gwi von Galois” (v. 1574), then appears henceforth as the abbreviated Gwigalois (v. 1658). Why the G was dropped from the title remains unexplained. In this investigation, I adhere to convention and write the title of the poem as Wigalois, and the name of the hero as Gwigalois.
way to the celebration. Gwigalois quickly organizes a military campaign in order to avenge the killing and put the murderer to justice.

Yet before the audience learns anything about the plan of attack or even about the participants, the narrator first describes a magnificent, luxurious tent that the hero commissions for his bride Larie. Mounted on the back of a war-elephant, a colossal and opulent *kastel* towers high in the air, an impressive structure adorned with exotic tapestries, lush carpets, beautiful golden vessels, and even mosquito nets woven from silk (vv. 10,342–10,408). Inside this remarkable tent sits the princess, whose clothing now becomes the subject of yet another description: her silk shift is “as white as a swan” (*wîz als ein swan*), her robe “more lustrous than a glowing flame” (*gelpfer danne ein gluot*), and set upon her three-colored brooch made of emeralds, sapphires and rubies are the tiny figures of wild animals, two lions and an eagle. The narrator sees this as an opportunity to remind the audience of who actually made this brooch—*he* did, with his storytelling skills: “thus this brooch was skillfully fashioned—with words—by Wirnt von Gravenberg.” In Middle High German: *alsus hât gemeistert dar nach dem wunsch ditze werc mit worten Wirnt von Grâvenberc* (vv. 10,574–10,576).

Lavish descriptions such as this are known as *ekphrasis*, one of the most important and commonly used rhetorical devices in ancient and medieval literature. Most recent scholarship has narrowed the definition of ekphrasis significantly to mean simply a verbal representation of visual representation, an attempted imitation in words of a real object from the plastic arts, usually a painting or piece of sculpture. The origins of this rhetorical device, however, date back to ancient Greece and the *Progymnasmata*, a series of rhetorical

---