The “experience” of clothing in late-medieval England, to borrow John Lydgate’s wording, was the experience of change. Clothing, as his *Fall of Princes* (1431–39) reminds us, marked not only Adam and Eve’s radical turn from the static state of grace and innocence—*thei stood in staat*—into the falling, erring, mutable material realm of “deth and pouerte” (658), but also marked the origins of self-generated change in human history, the first instance of “[c]haungyng thestate” (657), of altering the form or circumstance of something from its original condition. A similar point was more recently made by Elaine Scarry, who asserts that Adam and Eve’s fig leaves symbolize “their first cultural act wholly independent of God,” and that they present one example of “the capacity for cultural self-transformation through artifice.” For Lydgate, however, and for many of the poets that I will discuss in this book, this biblical scene is less about the act of artifice that turned fig leaves into garments than it is about the inherently transformative phenomenon of clothing itself. Lydgate dwells on the issue of changeability in this moment of his text, speaking in rapid succession of Adam and Eve’s “sodeyn chaung” (659), of their “onwar myscheeff” [sudden misfortune] (659), and of their “onhappi transmutacioun” (660) even as he also situates their altered vestimentary status as the symbol and narrative starting point for the larger interconnected history of earthly power and worldly mutability that is the focus of his monumental poem.

Lydgate’s treatment of humanity’s first sartorial event nicely demonstrates the primary subject of this book, which is the capacity of clothing
to organize ideas about cultural change, something that fascinated medieval poets and their audiences. I have chosen as my primary site of study a place and time in which the cultural pressures surrounding changes in clothing were overt: as scholars have shown, the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries marked a particularly innovative stage of vestimentary development in Europe, a period whose novel and ever-changing aesthetic sensibilities generated long moralizing castigations by homilists, satire and ridicule from moralists, and the first widespread wave of sumptuary laws that attempted to stabilize individual practices of consumption and appearance. The important cultural phenomenon that Roland Barthes called the “fashion system”—loosely defined as the rapid, systemic change of diverse forms of clothing—has recently been shown to have emerged and thrived in this period, a fact that offers seemingly irrefutable evidence of the important role that clothing played in the cultural formulations of change. Moreover, throughout high- and late-medieval Europe, the persistent association of clothing with stylistic novelty and its objects—imported fabrics, embroideries, and colors with ever-changing styles, shapes, and designs—was underscored by the highly symbolic role that particular garments played in transformative events, from the legendary sartorial episodes in the Fall and the Crucifixion and the celebrated rites of religious and secular investiture (and divestiture) to more ordinary material demonstrations of economic prosperity and downfall, socioeconomic and political mobility, and daily practices of consumption and self-fashioning.

As I will illustrate, English writers perceived these contemporary changes in distinctive ways: with a particularized conception of vacillating fashions as a governing national characteristic; with a deep investment in the (Boethian) philosophy of the changeable material world; and with a curiosity about the way emerging practices in vernacular writing, and especially vernacular lyric, might correspond to stylistic innovations in material culture. As they trace the developments of these ideas, the chapters of this book reveal that, despite their associations with frivolity and vanity, clothing and fashion were often understood to be philosophically and phenomenologically significant objects of study, engaging weighty issues of their culture, often under the guise of superficiality and caprice. Through their association with change, I will argue, clothing and fashion became important tropes for exploring the processes of material transience; correspondingly, through its association with clothing, the notion of change in effect became reified as an aesthetic act, an identifiable practice that could be observed, analyzed, and poeticized. To give a sense of the scope of these critical developments, in this introduction I provide two examples of the type of unexpected analytic depth that clothing offers two
very different texts: one an uncharacteristic treatise by the Church patriarch, Tertullian, and the other a virtually forgotten anecdotal lyric by the English poet Chaucer. I will then turn to discussing in detail the current state of scholarship on medieval fashion and the special currency that the topic of vestimentary changeability had in high- and late-medieval England.

THE PALLIUM AND THE PILCHE: THEORIZING CLOTHING AND CHANGE

Postmodern theorists in a variety of fields have discussed clothing’s unique status as one of the most radically innovative forms of material culture, as a material practice whose extraordinary capacity for change gives rise to an equally powerful ability to mediate cultural experience and meaning. Roland Barthes was one of the earliest to theorize this potential in his discussion of the inherent “ambiguity” of fashion’s anthropological enterprise: “simultaneously unpredictable and systematic, regular and unknown, aleatory and structured, [Fashion] fantastically conjoins the intelligible without which men could not live and the unpredictability attached to the myth of life.”

Cultural theorist Grant McCracken argues that clothing in itself brings both change and continuity, giving form to otherwise volatile historical moments: “clothing can be used as a historical operator which serves not only to reflect changing historical circumstances but also as a device which creates and constitutes this change in cultural terms.” While for McCracken clothing establishes and organizes cultural change, making it visible, palpable, and open for scrutiny or debate, anthropologist Webb Keane describes the change that is effected by clothing through what he calls the “unrealized future” of sartorial semiotics—the cultural expectation that clothing changes people, and the fact that new clothing “makes possible or inhibits new practices, habits, and intentions.” In clothing historian Gilles Lipovetsky’s mind, aesthetic ingenuity in clothing demonstrates the important role that change plays in notions of human autonomy: “fashion attests to the human capacity to change, the ability of men and women to invent new modes of appearance . . . [and] the effort of human beings to make themselves masters of the conditions of their own existence.”

Whether in the generic sense of the word “clothing” used by McCracken and Keane, or in regard to the larger system of meaning called “fashion” used by Barthes and Lipovetsky—a distinction of terms that I will revisit later in this introduction—the theoretical value of clothing described by these critics was not lost on early writers. My first textual example can be
found in an unlikely place: the work of the third-century Church father Tertullian. In addition to his oft-cited scathing comments about the unnaturalness of female ornament and attire, Tertullian—who was fascinated, if not, as R. Howard Bloch has suggested, “obsessed” with the moral concerns generated by ornamentation—wrote a treatise about his own attire that made an argument for a natural law of sartorial change. Finding the need to defend publicly his own sartorial shift from wearing the Roman toga to the Greek philosophers’ pallium, a square, simple garment that eventually usurped the toga in Roman usage, Tertullian presented a treatise to the men of Carthage that situated ever-changing fashions within a universal law of change. Tertullian’s attitude in this speech is surprising considering his well-known moralizing position in other texts devoted to clothing. Here, he champions sartorial change. All the world, Tertullian declares, invoking Plato’s theory of forms, is versiform, or shape-changing [totum uersiforme est]. Human changes in clothing style should not be criticized, he argues, but should rather be seen in the context of the world’s celebrated and numerous natural changes, which include vacillations of atmosphere, geography, and vegetation; animals who change their forms, hues, and sexes; and the translatio of human power and fortune. Tertullian’s defense of sartorial change as a human practice and a historical process lays the groundwork for later discussions about the importance of clothing as an interpretive lens for understanding human self-knowledge and human history. Pointing out the critical role of clothing changes in various creation myths, for example, he describes in detail Adam and Eve’s vestimentary progression from nakedness at birth to fig leaves and eventually to skins; then, broadening the discussion for his non-Christian listeners, he connects this tale to the mythical origins of clothing in the work of Mercury, Minerva, and Arachne. After defending vestimentary change as an ontological category, Tertullian turns to the everyday experience and local history of the garments in question: not only is the toga, unlike the pallium, an unwieldy, uncomfortable, and impractical garment that one throws off as soon as entering one’s house, he declares, but also its elevated association with Roman style disguises its checkered past as the dress of the Pelagians and Etruscans. At the end of the text he declares the pallium to have a new, improved philosophical purpose—to adorn Christians: “gaude pallium et exsulta! melior iam te philosophia dignata est ex quo Christianum vestire coepisti” [Be glad, O pallium, and exult! Now a better philosophy has considered you worthy, since you began to clothe the Christian].

Tertullian’s text nicely demonstrates, through its deconstructive thoroughness and associational breadth, the way culture interpolates symbolic mean-
ing into the experience of material objects: what does it mean to change “a toga ad pallium”? [from toga to pallium], the text asks. It means the origin of life, the fall from grace, the law of nature, translatio imperii, religious purpose, and a lighter load on one’s shoulders on a hot Carthage day. The multiple registers of meaning associated with dress work together here to establish the unique capabilities of clothing as an object of theoretical study: at once allegorical and material, old and new, public and private, clothing stretches to encompass the overlapping and ever-changing experiences of the body, the intellect, and the soul. By publicly donning the rudimentary garment of the Greek philosophers, Tertullian symbolically strips himself of ornament and its associations, aligning himself, and ultimately all Christians, with the Stoic philosopher who eschews material distractions. The pallium was subsequently to become the privileged attire of popes and archbishops and the garment that artists imagined to have dressed Christ and the early patriarchs; as Tertullian puts it, the sight, and even the thought of, the pallium makes vices blush.

Yet while Tertullian ostensibly means his self-fashioning to perform sartorial constancy, he also seems to acknowledge that by exchanging his toga for a pallium he is following a type of fashion trend. He makes clear that it is not only followers of Philosophy who wear the garment; teachers, doctors, poets, musicians, and “all of liberal studies” [omnis liberalitas studiorum] have also chosen to dress themselves in this way. Tertullian further underscores the paradoxical allure of the pallium by drawing attention to the stylistic correlation between rhetorical and sartorial eloquence, and by arguing for the persuasive powers of his clothing: “etsi eloquium quiescat . . . ipse habitus sonat. Sic denique auditur philosophus dum uidetur” [although eloquence is mute . . . this garment resounds. A philosopher, in fact, is heard so long as he is seen]. In this dramatic speech that powerfully and wittily performs a change of attire in front of a live audience—if he did not go so far as to change his garment during this speech, he was surely wearing the pallium throughout it—Tertullian effectively adds back rhetorically what he has taken away materially. Rather than removing himself and his garments from the cycles of fashion, his statement codifies and naturalizes human sartorial change and places the pallium within that larger system. At the same time, he brings intense focus to the status of the novel vestimentary object itself, demonstrating that even the most plain, simple, and modest garment can still evoke a plethora of cultural associations and interpretive possibilities, often far beyond the local history or social standing of the individual who wears it. Tertullian’s pallium makes philosophy fashionable, and his De Pallio makes clothing, and changing clothes, philosophical.
A similar curiosity about sartorial change drives my second example. One of his shortest and possibly least-read poems, Chaucer’s “Proverbe” offers a preliminary glimpse at how a philosophical English poet imaginatively engaged with the problem of sartorial diversity in the fourteenth century. Even in the mundane, daily use of clothes, this poem suggests, we are always negotiating the conceptual predicaments brought up by vestimentary change. The poem reads, in its entirety:

What shul these clothes thus manyfold,
Lo this hote somers day?
After grete hete cometh cold;
No man caste his pilche away.

Of al this world the large compass
Yt wil not in myn armes tweyne;
Who so mochel wol embrace,
Litel therof he shal distreyne.

(1–8)\(^15\)

These short verses infuse the English preoccupation with abundance and variety in clothing with a clear interest in how material change influences self-knowledge and thus one’s knowledge of the world. The blunt material problem posed by the opening question—*what shall be done with so many clothes / on this hot summer day?*—invokes any number of practical dilemmas posed by seasonal clothing such as proper storage, socially appropriate seasonal attire, and physical comfort in a changing climate.\(^16\) The issue of wearing excessive clothing for fashion’s sake regardless of season was especially timely when Chaucer was writing. The 1363 sumptuary legislation’s withdrawal of the right of any subject to wear fur in the summer months, for example, shows how prevalent such practices were.\(^17\) Read alone, the opening line’s evident problematic regarding “manifold” clothing directly engages with the issue of English *varietas vestium* [variety of clothing] a topic that I will discuss in more depth below, and that has been proven to be particularly germane in Chaucer’s works. As Laura F. Hodges puts it, in the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer provides “the widest range (quality and value) of contemporary fabric names in a single English literary work in the Middle Ages."\(^18\) What shall be done with so many clothes, indeed?

Both countering and complementing the initial material concerns of the opening question, the second stanza of Chaucer’s short poem invokes the rhythms and lived experiences of material life. The circular movement and
thematic of lines 3 through 8 address the intangible things of life: in the turning of the seasons, the related *abab cded* rhyme pattern, and the “compass” of the world encircled in two arms, we are led to contemplate life’s inevitable temporalities, our own nostalgic awareness regarding past lessons learned, and the wholesale optimism of summer giving way to the privation of winter. Layers and quantities of clothing are used as a metaphor for change here, but a change that is not wholly unexpected; one’s outer garment or “pilch” works as yet another subtle reminder of the cyclical nature of our material existence: after warmth and abundance will inevitably come colder, darker times. And as in life, the restrained impulse to “caste . . . away” unwanted garments in the first part of the poem is replaced in the second with the insatiable desire for “so mochel” more. Whether this expansive appetite is purely material—in the medieval sense of *covettise*—or an abstract ambition, or both, the short poem does not clarify.19 The overall message, however, clearly regards the conflict between desire and necessity: while one *wants* the world, one *needs* a winter coat.

But the poem is even more complicated. The “pilche,” a common outer jacket made of fur or skins and worn by both men and women in this period, had clear associations with the coat of skins with which Adam and Eve are clothed in Genesis 3:21, as the Latin Vulgate *tunicas pellicias* (from *pellicius*, made of skins) becomes *pilche* in texts such as the Middle English *Story of Genesis and Exodus.*20 Sermonizers disagreed about the ramifications of these garments. While the influential preacher John Bromyard (d. 1352) describes them as an early ideal of sartorial simplicity, a clothing standard—much like the nakedness of Christ on the Cross, he declares—from which people should learn to cast away their own excessively various attire, Chaucer’s later contemporary Robert Rypon claims that the garments of skins given by God to replace the self-styled fig leaves represent the shameful and sinful nature of postlapsarian humanity.21 By situating this popular proverb about clothing in relation to the vacillating material world, Chaucer probes both the theoretical implications and the moral parameters of clothing, pointing out the fundamental irreconcilability of the ‘all covet all lose’ message with the material practices of daily life. He insists, much like Tertullian centuries earlier, that we keep in mind the ‘natural’ cycles of clothing usage before criticizing fashion’s excessive variability, and yet he also makes sure that we recognize a paradox about clothing in his culture: that while one might be able to cast away superfluous clothes at the end of a season, one will never be able to remove one’s “pilch,” the material burden of Adam and Eve that is played out over and over in our own vestimentary vacillations.
FASHION AND VARIETAS VESTIUM IN MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

My argument in this book is that clothing has historically provided an important way to index and to comment on forms of cultural change, and that this symbolic function becomes intensified during a period of particularly radical vestimentary changes in high- and late-medieval England. In the previous examples I have tried to demonstrate how theoretically provocative clothing was for early writers as a cultural signifier of change; now, because it has historically been so important in the integration of clothing into the thematics of change, I will establish the place of fashion as a related but distinct concept in the medieval world.

The scholarly interest in fashion as a cultural system has compelled a provocative yet relatively fluid retreat into history. Since the iconic studies by Thorstein Veblen and Fernand Braudel, fashion has been inextricably linked with the development of consumption, and as the point of origins for consumer economies has lately been pushed further and further back into the modern, early modern, and finally premodern periods, so have the origins of fashion. The most vigorous scholarly debate involves the exact period when and place where “fashion” first emerged as a cultural system. While older critical models focused on nineteenth-century France and eighteenth-century England, recent studies argue for earlier and earlier junctures: sixteenth-century England, fifteenth-century Florence, fourteenth-century England, fourteenth-century Burgundy, and, most recently, thirteenth-century France. The vast majority of recent scholarship on medieval costume locates the birth of Western fashion in the virtual revolution of European dress that emerged in and around the 1340s, when the rounded, loose, toga-inspired, less emphatically gendered garments that had been worn for centuries suddenly became tighter, tailored, padded, and variously colored, with fitted sleeves and torsos, conspicuous hip belts and accessories, elongated limbs and pointed hats, dramatically shortened and stuffed doublets for men, and a penchant for slitted and slashed extremities. As one anonymous sermonizer describes it, dress in this period consisted of “dyvers atyre, as of strayt clothes and schorte, and daggede hodes other typpes, chausures dysgysed and y-tyed up streyt in thre stedes, baudrykes and baselardes and crakowes of half a fote longe, harlotes and laddes and other dysgysynges” [diverse attire, as of straight clothes and short, and dagged hoods and other tippets, boots disguised and tied up straight in three places, belts, ornamental daggers, crackows (long pointed shoes) of half a foot long, shoe thongs and other disguisings].

Recent studies have challenged this scholarly consensus regarding the
fourteenth-century emergence of fashion as phenomenon. Returning to the type of structuralist model of fashion analysis used by Barthes and Baudrillard, for example, Sarah-Grace Heller’s *Fashion in Medieval France* persuasively identifies a clear fashion system in thirteenth-century France, a culture that demonstrates the existence of all ten of the author’s specialized “criteria” for fashion’s existence. Heller’s is the first book-length literary study to turn its full attention to the problem of ‘the birth of fashion’ in the Middle Ages, and she discusses the extent to which this subject has been previously skewed by the predominant use of visual, rather than textual, evidence to make historical claims. Declaring that “a shift in methodology is in order” for understanding fashion as a cultural phenomenon, Heller calls not only for further analysis of clothing symbolism in literary texts but also for a more concerted effort to understand fashion as a systemic whole rather than as a series of isolated social, material, and economic developments. Importantly, even as her meticulous structuralism maps out the codes of medieval fashion as an emergent (twelfth-century) and existing (thirteenth-century) cultural system occurring much earlier than previously thought, Heller proposes an end to misguided scholarly quests for origins, carefully avoiding any claim of her historical finding as a definitive cultural starting point.

If early literary texts have been undervalued in identifying historical models of ever-changing fashion, the same cannot be said for the influence of fashion studies on medieval literary and cultural studies. The emergence of fashion has served as the backdrop for a rich interdisciplinary discussion about cultural formations of identity in medieval Europe to which literary scholars have substantially added. Claire Sponsler’s groundbreaking work on medieval dress and consumption, for example, reveals that the meticulous social stratification of late-medieval English regulatory discourses ironically generated numerous possibilities for using dress as a medium of cultural resistance. Susan Crane’s study of ritualized courtier performances in England and France makes the discovery that medieval selfhood was often understood to exist in external public performances such as costume, rather than in interior consciousness. Likewise, E. Jane Burns, in her two substantial studies on dress in twelfth- and thirteenth-century French courtly love literature, finds that fashionable garments often operate against the grain of textual and social expectations, as cultural crossing points that disrupt paradigms regarding internality and externality, gender roles and relations, and East–West interactions.

A common argumentative thread in these generative studies by Sponsler, Crane, and Burns is that medieval clothing symbolism often gives rise to the critically unexpected: it offers, respectively, resistance instead of regula-
tion, identity instead of pretense, and disruption instead of categorization. This potential for unexpectedness speaks to clothing’s symbiotic relationship with change in this period—to the “unpredictability” that Barthes attributes to the fashion system. As Crane points out, unpredictability was an important part of the consumer culture built around the demand for fashionable clothes; the endless reshaping of clothing silhouettes in the fourteenth century, she states, made “change itself an aspect of consumption.”32 With fashion as either the text or the subtext of most recent critical studies on medieval clothing, the link between dress and changeability appears everywhere within them—from modern definitions of fashion’s inherent mutability, to actual changes in clothing color, style, and shape, to the changing social codes that follow changing styles, to the myriad personal and social transformations that medieval vestimentary performances are said to bring about. Yet the cultural association between clothing and change described by medieval writers has not yet generated a study that undertakes the topic in its own regard. My methodological interest in medieval fashion, by contrast, lies precisely in its consummate demonstration of clothing’s troping of change, a topic that I trace in this book from late-antique discussions about the changeable material world to late-medieval depictions of changing aesthetic practices more broadly.

In high- and late-medieval England, the ubiquitous discourses about fashion’s changeability performed a particular type of cultural work. While moralists and satirists throughout medieval Europe deplored the ‘alien’ nature of new fashions in their midst whether those fashions were in fact of foreign origin or not, in late-medieval England this discourse reached the proportions of a national pastime.33 Sometimes the foreign fashions blamed were those worn by the French during the Hundred Years War; sometimes they were connected with specific foreign courtiers in the English court during this period, such as those who arrived with Philippa of Hainault when she married Edward III, as I discuss below. In most cases, imitation of foreign fashions served as the incentive for a discussion of England’s self-identified vice of varietas vestium [variety of clothing], wherein England’s sartorial diversity was associated with myriad other kinds of cultural mutability.34 This pervasive narrative about the national penchant for varietas vestium is found in late-medieval sermons, chronicles, aristocratic clothing accounts, and poems, and it encompasses both the visual impression of England’s diverse aesthetic and the frequency with which that aesthetic changed: fashions were said not only to look new, strange, and unstable but also literally to change every year, every week, every day, or even several times a day. Likewise, the deleterious effects of wearing these fashions ranged in intensity from disrupting categories of
social status, to effecting personal misfortune or death, to fulfilling prophecies of national disaster regarding military and economic failings, plague, revolution, or apocalypse.

Andrew Galloway has identified the Benedictine monk Ranulf Higden’s popular chronicle of English history, the *Polychronicon* (1330s–40s), as a major source text for many circulating ideas regarding English *varietas vestium* as a national feature. Higden’s influential discussion of English diversity in dress, Galloway argues, helped to create the trope of English social instability as “a set feature of national ideology,” ensuring that the stereotype of reckless, variable Englishmen who (in Higden’s words) “squeamishly despise their own things, and commend those of others,” and who “freely transfigure themselves into what pertains to others” became a mark of national self-consciousness. We can see this impulse when English sermonizers denounce the long-term evolution of clothing through the ages, decrying the change from Adam and Eve’s tunics of skins to the increasingly luxurious and foreign contemporary garments—“diversely decorated,” in Robert Rypon’s words, “in an infinite variety of ways.” English chroniclers connected England’s *varietas vestium* to more recent historical events. A representative example can be seen in John of Reading’s entry for 1344 in his *Chronica*, which (written in hindsight in 1366–68) blames English mutability in dress on Philippa of Hainault’s influence and also positions this mutability as the cause for the plague of 1348–49:

Anglici tum insaniae alienigenarum adhaerentes velut de adventu Hanno-nensium, annis quasi xviii praecelipsis, annuatim varias deformitates vestium mutantes, longorum largorumque indumentorum antiqua honestate deserta, vestibus curtis, strictis, frustratis, scissis, omni parte laqueatis, corrigiatis, botonatis cum manicis ac tipeitis supertunicarum et caputiarum nimirum pendulis, tortoribus et, ut verius dicam, daemonibus tam indumentis quam calciamentis similires quam hominibus. Et si clerici seu religiosi aliquibus dictorum usi sunt, non regulares sed irregulares judicentur. Mulieres enim in praedictis et aliis curiosius fluxerunt, adeo stricte vestitae, ut ad anos celandos caudas vulpinas vestibus inferius consutas penderent. Quorum forte superbia futuris praetendit infortunia.

[Ever since the arrival of the Hainaulters about eighteen years ago the English have been madly following outlandish ways, changing their deformed varieties of clothing yearly. They have abandoned the old, decent style of long, full garments for clothes which are short, tight, impractical, slashed, every part laced, strapped or buttoned up, with the sleeves of the
gowns and the tippets of the hoods hanging down to absurd lengths, so that, if truth be told, their clothes and footwear make them look more like torturers, or even demons, than men. Clerics and other religious adopted the same fashions, and should be considered not “regulars,” but “irregulars.” Women flowed with the tides of fashion in this and other things even more eagerly, wearing clothes that were so tight that they wore a fox tail hanging down inside their skirts at the back, to hide their asses. The sin of pride manifested in this way must surely bring down misfortune in the future.]38

Like the Latin chroniclers, vernacular writers also used specific keywords concerning English sartorial imitation, mutability, and variety and their moral implications: clothing is above all else dyver, a word around which a plethora of synonyms and related words, such as desgyseyde, countrefete, excessyf, and manifold are usually clustered.39 As we see in the later Brut chronicle, which echoes Reading’s almost word for word, varietas vestium turns into England’s “diuers schappis”: “þey [the English] ordeyned and chaungyd ham euery ȝere diuers schappis of disgynge3 of cloþing.”40

As the growing vocabulary depicting vestimentary change in late-medieval England attests, the culture of change encompassing English clothing in this period also took root at the level of the English language itself. Most significantly, and despite earlier studies that state the contrary, the English term “fashion” as a word meaning rapidly changing dress clearly existed in fourteenth-century England. A satirical poem dated to 1380 on manners and costume that I discuss in depth in chapter 5, for example, describes the “newe facoun” (alternate spelling, “newe fascion”) of the English people in this period as not only “now shorte and now longe” but, like its wearers, “now is here, now goon.”41 Also captured in this important linguistic moment in England is evidence of the larger conceptual connection between clothing and change that I address in this book, as seen in the usage of the Middle English words “chaunge” and “chaungen”: for a person to “change,” as we say in modern colloquial English, using a phrase that emerges in the fifteenth century, meant then, as it does now, “to change clothes.”42

England’s self-perpetuating reputation for sartorial imitation, appropriation, variety, and mutability serves as the backdrop for the arguments that I make in this book. Medieval writers who treated the subject of clothing during the rise of the fashion system had to contend not only with the capricious spectacle of novelty that they witnessed around themselves—evidence of new technologies, new tailoring, new silhouettes, shapes, fabrics, and terms, all of which had the potential to change faster than the texts describing them could be written and copied—but also with a cultural tradition telling them that
clothing’s inherent changeability was a cipher for more important questions about the instability of English identity, and of human existence in the material world more generally. The trope of the Englishman consumed with his own “diuers schappis” provided one way of inquiring into the myriad workings of cultural change. Its importance is suggested not only by its prevalence in medieval culture but also by its historical staying power, as it went on to become a controlling trope in the early modern period, where the stereotype took on new and equally fascinating cultural resonances.43

**THIS BOOK’S DESIGN**

Much of this book examines the trope of change within literary descriptions of contemporary clothing that were either written by or read by medieval English subjects. It begins, however, with a somewhat inverted critical approach, which is to examine the trope of clothing in the source text that represents that culture’s most ubiquitous theory of change. Chapter 1 effectively positions the sartorial symbolism of Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae* as a type of textual prehistory to medieval English notions of sartorial changeability, suggesting that the conceptual framework within which later writers understood the phenomenon of fashion already existed in late-antique discourses about the changeable material world. The *Consolatio* begins with a philosophical question similar to Tertullian’s question about his *pallium*, albeit in a very different context: what does it mean, the text asks, to be suddenly stripped of all one’s material goods, to change from wearing the robe of a *magister officiorum* to that of a prisoner under penalty of death? Boethius’s influential book, I argue, implicitly presents its most crucial argument in sartorial terms: worldly changeability is both symbolized by and experienced through Fortune’s infamous manipulation of her subjects’ attire. Unlike Tertullian, Boethius does not focus on the social history and context of his change in dress, but rather uses the abstract philosophical connection between clothing and being—inhherited from the Aristotelian concept of the *habitus*—to structure more broadly his discussion of human happiness in the face of material mutability.

In chapter 2 I argue that writers throughout high- and late-medieval Europe created in Boethius an authority for the moral and philosophical questions surrounding the use of dress and ornamentation in daily life, and created in Fortune, his most famous character, an icon for myriad explorations and reimaginings of fashion as a purveyor of change. I draw attention to a little-known text from the thirteenth century, *De disciplina scholarium*
[On the Training of Scholars], which was attributed to Boethius and which was used by the Dominican friar Nicholas Trevet in his influential early-fourteenth-century commentary on the *Consolatio*, to analyze Boethius’s understanding of luxury ornament in general and self-fashioning in particular. I also discuss how, in a parallel development, writers in twelfth- and thirteenth-century France and in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century England used Fortune’s association with fashion to explore the connection between self-fashioning and free will. When writers such as Jean de Meun, Chaucer, Lydgate, and Charles d’Orléans associate Fortune with the most fashionable garments of the day and ascribe to her control over the nuances of style and novelty, they also, I argue, begin to scrutinize the experience of fashion as a mechanism of self-control, and the corresponding ability of the fashionable to take charge of their own material destinies.

Chapter 3 returns to the thirteenth century to begin examining other paradigms of vestimentary change—in this case, the contentious subjects of fashion and self-fashioning in ecclesiastical dress. One important garment, the episcopal *capa* (cape or cope), came under the scrutiny of two very different kinds of texts, a monumental liturgical treatise (William Durand’s *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, or *Rationale for the Divine Offices*), and a little-known goliardic lyric called “Song upon the Tailors.” These texts address a growing problem at the heart of contemporary Church attire: how the changing fashion of actual garments worn by the clergy no longer accorded with the biblical instructions that gave those ecclesiastical garments their authority. While Durand attends to this problem by theorizing and categorizing the types of change made available to him through allegorical exposition, the anonymous satirical poet turns instead to the larger culture of change he sees in his immediate sociopolitical context. Parodying both the biblical trope of God as a tailor and the stasis of Old Testament law, the sartorial “law of metamorphosis” presented by this poet compares the tailor’s godlike ability to sartorially transform bodies and subjectivities with the tremendous vesting power of the bishop, who transforms his subjects through practices of investiture or divestiture, and also transforms himself through the ritualized donning of sacred—although fashionable—attire. In this way changes in clothing once again frame questions of one’s own material destiny in the face of divine design.

Turning to one of the most popular tales of the fourteenth century, chapter 4 examines the moralized rhetoric of vestimentary change that underlies Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* and *Envoy*. In the sartorially challenged figure of Griselda resides a clerkly comment on the heated debates of the day with respect to female consumption, ownership, and attire. Chaucer’s version of
the tale explicitly accentuates its material context: while Griselda’s stoicism reads like a Boethian manual on how to endure the fluctuations of Fortune’s goods, for instance, her quiescent antimaterialism is challenged by the aggressive dressing and spending habits of the Envoy’s contemporary “arch wives,” and by the Clerk’s own vestimentary and rhetorical frugality, which betrays an excessiveness equal to the ornament that he shuns. This chapter moves the provocative subject of sartorial mutability from the realm of spiritual order to that of socioeconomic development, mapping out the Clerk’s strategy of associating aesthetic novelty with the mercantile nouveaux riches.

My final chapter examines the revolutionary ethos of change represented by the medieval English galaunt. This critically neglected figure of fashion epitomizes English varietas vestium, encapsulating in his very name the imitation of French fashions at the heart of that national trait. A parody of English mutability in dress, the medieval galaunt’s ever-changing foreign fashions, stuffed codpieces, and empty pockets appear to mark him as a stock figure of mirth and moral depravity. A look at the evolution of this figure as a literary trope, however, demonstrates his profound ability to mediate the cultural experience of aesthetic turmoil. The galaunt’s celebration of aesthetic upheaval organizes ideas about sociopolitical upheaval; his changing fashions are repeatedly linked with a mysterious prophecy about the future downfall of England, and emerge in association with two violent episodes of insurrection—in the fourteenth century, the Uprising of 1381, and in the fifteenth century, the Jack Cade rebellion. The late-medieval impulse to historicize this figure, I argue, reframes the galaunt as an “event,” a phenomenon of historical consequence that lingers in the workings of both cultural memory and poetic aesthetics.

Together, these chapters uncover two main categories of cultural change. The first type concerns the phenomenological meaning of clothing symbolism in high- and late-medieval culture, its tendency to reveal what Lydgate, to return to the epigraph of this introduction, calls the “experience” of clothing. Many of the texts that I explore in these chapters use change and variety in clothing to reveal and examine the mundane structures and patterns of lived experience, whether daily routines of dressing and undressing; seasonal changes in attire; social mobility upward or downward; practices of consumption, possession, and loss; or changes of style and appearance. Writers also frequently depict the experience of change through incessant rhythms and cycles of clothing vacillations, a literary-cultural phenomenon that Barthes calls the “endless garment”: whether falling, rising, turning, cycling, mutating, metamorphosing, or shape-shifting, the garments described by medieval writers and explored in this book connote a sense of inexhaustible novelty.
and variation. Part of my argument, therefore, is that these recurring patterns of vestimentary meaning manifest a heightened awareness of the mutable material world, allowing medieval writers and readers to actively engage with the relationship between their own changeability and that of the world around them. In the same way that Fortune’s wheel provided a rhythmic pattern though which to understand the highs and lows of material life, I argue, so the daily stripping and donning of garments—and the associated cycles of quickly changing fashions—offered a convenient, easily accessible trope for the constitutive experience of material acquisition, ownership, and loss.

A second, related, category of change that I explore here is that of poetic aesthetics. Chaucer’s “Proverbe,” which I discuss above, comments on aesthetic excess through its relative absence of poetic ornament: the poem is manifestly spare, with its extreme brevity, regular rhyme scheme, short lines, and dominance of unisyllabic words (the key term “manyfold” [many and various] in line 1 is, appropriately, the only word longer than two syllables). Several of the texts in this book display similar aesthetic strategies, discussing clothing and other material goods in ways that overtly resist engaging the poetic practices (and pleasures) of excessive ornamental imagery or technical detail. Other poems that I consider take the opposite approach and instead mimic the mannered artifice of their fashionable subjects by, for example, using excessive lists of fashion terms or descriptions, by including Frenchified vocabulary that echoes the English imitation of French fashions, by employing acrostics and other highly ornamental poetic forms to convey a self-conscious aesthetic style, or by writing the text in macaronic and alternating mixed-language poetic forms that perform verbally and even visually the diverse and transitory nature of the clothes they describe. Together these poems illustrate a growing interest in the aesthetics of change, and in presenting change as an aesthetic event or action that can be observed, examined, and practiced through literary means. Through a wide range of genres and time periods, therefore, the texts in these chapters tell a surprisingly consistent story, which is that the literary trope of vestimentary change stages powerful questions about the experience of the changeable material world, and that these questions are often presented through variable and hybrid literary forms which themselves recreate the material and stylistic changeability that is also their subject.