Fashioning Change
Denny-Brown, Andrea

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/23959.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/23959

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=902962
Local spectators attending the morality play *Bien Advisé et Mal Advisé* in Rennes, Brittany, in 1439 would have beheld the dramatic introduction of four kings costumed in different stages of wealth and status and named, respectively, Regnabo, Regno, Regnavi, and Sine regno: I shall reign, I reign, I have reigned, I am without reign. After watching the kings assume their appropriate positions on a rather sophisticated mechanical stage version of Fortune’s wheel, they would have seen the (most likely male) actor playing Lady Fortune deliver the following lines:

Je vois monstrer ma laide face  
A ce galant qui est la haut.  
Il cuide que soie endormie . . .  
Et veult tous mes biens recevoir.

[I will show my ugly face / To that gallant who is up high; / He expects that I should have fallen asleep . . . / And desires to receive all my goods.]²

According to the stage directions Fortune would subsequently strip the man at the top of the wheel and look at him “with her terrible face” (Adonc le despoille et leregar[de] a terrible face), after which she would turn the prop
wheel one quarter turn and invest the next king at the top—Regnabo—with the spoils taken from the first. After watching this cycle of stripping and turning performed four times, and hearing a variety of theatrical speeches in between, the audience would have ultimately seen the two allegedly “unfortunate” kings (Regnavi and Sine regno) get off the wheel, confess, and go to heaven, and the two “fortunate” kings (Regnabo and Regno) stay on the wheel, only to be murdered at Fortune’s command and sent to the pits of hell.

This dramatized performance of the highly popular medieval conceit of Fortune’s wheel captures brilliantly the essence of Fortune’s powers. If you desire to receive “all her goods” then you will find yourself, one day when you least expect it, utterly and completely dispossessed. But that is not all: you will continue to desire her goods—will continue to ride at the whim of the turning wheel—long after learning of its instability, and long after experiencing the loss that, according to Fortune, inevitably follows any gain. As a symbol of the linked trajectories of rising and falling symbolic capital and social status, the motif of Fortune’s spinning wheel offered medieval culture a valuable vehicle through which to explore both the material and ethical role of goods in society. In its most basic articulation the lesson of the goddess Fortune teaches that the cultural experience of change is systemically rooted in the desire for, attachment to, and power and status bestowed by material goods. In both this chapter and in the following one, I will examine Fortune’s clothing as her material good *par excellence*, arguing not only for its importance in historical depictions of the goddess and the cultural change she embodies, but also for its importance to the topic of dress itself as a literary trope and a cultural phenomenon—as both a marker for and mediator of the medieval subject’s experience of material change.

As the example above illustrates, Fortune’s stripping of her subjects is a crucial aspect of the event that signifies her change of favors: before she ever turns the wheel she must perform a twofold stripping away: first despoiling the gallant of his clothing and then revealing her own “ugly” face—a gesture that materializes the “ugly truth” behind her gifts. Moreover, a third instance of sartorial revelation has also been performed, which is that Fortune’s unmasking points to the open secret of the cross-dressed actor playing Fortune, whose masculine features would greatly enhance both the humor and uncanniness of her changed countenance. While Fortune’s wheel symbolizes the abstract, unrelenting *structure* of material change in the world, her power over changes in clothing, both that of her subjects and herself (which, as I will discuss in chapter 2, changes dramatically as the Middle Ages progress), personalizes and familiarizes material changeability, drawing new atten-
tion to a medium that every reader and audience member must interact with numerous times a day. Vestimentary revelation of the type performed by Fortune in *Bien Advisé et Mal Advisé* has traditionally been understood through the medieval notion of aesthetic integument—that is, the literary practice of allegorical covering and uncovering through which philosophical truth is imagined to be progressively discovered. Considering Fortune’s role in the medieval understanding of material goods, however, it seems equally important to read the vestimentary discourses associated with her figure for their material implications—that is, for their relation to material culture as well as to the notion of materiality itself. As I discussed in my introduction, the symbolic function of clothing spans the practical and the speculative. While on the one hand clothing highlights the historicity of a subject according to categories of time, place, gender, race, and socioeconomic situation, it also speaks to larger ontological and metaphysical questions about the central role material objects play in human experience and self-understanding. This dialectic resonates strikingly in the medieval myth of Fortune, in which changes of clothing stand in both for mundane, personal material gains and losses and for the randomness of all earthly, material power.

As an early step in my discussion of clothing and change, this chapter offers a reading of what might be considered the root text for Western medieval ideas about Fortune’s changing goods as well as about the relationship between mundane and metaphysical goods. Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae* (c. 525) situates its famous protagonist in the paralyzing grip of Fortune’s cycle of having and losing; its basic purpose is to help the poet-protagonist and reader to understand and then escape the lure of Fortune’s wheel of goods. Because the frame of Boethius’s book is so familiar to readers of medieval literature, it is easy to forget that the primary medium for this process of understanding is vestimentary: as the epigraph to this chapter suggests, the *Consolatio* is, first and foremost, a book about a man literally stripped of his possessions. This is the state in which we find the protagonist at the beginning of Boethius’s text: despoiled, imprisoned, and exiled, he laments his recent change of fortunes, change of appearance, and even change of attire. While the remaining books of the *Consolatio* are ostensibly meant to lead the protagonist’s thoughts away from his altered material condition, this condition, and the vestimentary tropes that sustain it, as I will discuss in depth below, inherently provide the circumstance, the subject, and the impetus for Boethius’s literary and philosophical project. To give a brief outline of the text’s development: the allegorical figure of Philosophy suddenly appears to the protagonist shortly after his opening elegiac poem in Book I, stating that she must detach him from the false goods he mourns and
lead him toward a more metaphysical good (the *summum bonum* or supreme Good of God, we later learn). In Book II, Philosophy describes Fortune's changeability and her goods, rhetorically positioning herself as Fortune to argue against the protagonist's bitter complaints, and identifying friendship alone as the counteragent to worldly goods. In Book III, Philosophy discusses the nature of true happiness, in part by describing once again the false goods that must be rejected in order to find the one true good. In Book IV, Philosophy addresses the nature of evil and the larger question of Fortune's chaotic changeability in the face of unchangeable divine order (divine providence). In Book V, the final book, Philosophy addresses the relationship of human free will to divine providence. Free will, she says, is restricted by the things of the world; the more the soul is tied to worldly goods, the more imprisoned and shackled it becomes.

This simplified outline of the *Consolatio* makes evident the extent to which the worldly things that were stripped from the protagonist prior to the text's narrative are a constant concern in the dialogues between Philosophy and the protagonist. They are so ever-present, in fact, that recent scholars have come to doubt the ultimate efficacy of Philosophy's teachings, preferring to see the *Consolatio* for its failed attempt at material transcendence, rather than for the successful philosophical journey toward speculative knowledge that it outlines for itself. In examining the vestimentary discourses associated with Fortune's goods in the *Consolatio*, this chapter means to take up one of the more prominent examples of Boethius's interest in objects and things within his larger and incomparably influential discussion of material changeability. I argue, most basically, that in the symbolic field of the *Consolatio*, images of clothing and ornament mediate the protagonist's experience of material change and in the process help him conceptualize his experience of and relationship to material goods. Because vestimentary goods in many ways come to represent all of Fortune's goods in this text, they become a key element of Boethius's larger methodology of examining and turning away from inherently changeable material things, a method that implicitly ties an individual's process of knowledge to his or her attentiveness to habitual material practices. Ultimately, Boethius's text suggests, the true gift offered by material goods is that they carry within them the ability to effect immaterial realization through the experience of material loss.

Critics of the *Consolatio* have tended to focus on the text's epistemologies of philosophy and literature, largely neglecting the formative role that material goods themselves play in the logic of the text. To speak of Boethius's interest in "things" is usually to engage his well-established interest in the metaphysical problem of universals, a topic that was introduced into
high- and late-medieval culture by Boethius's own translations of and commentaries on Aristotle and his Neoplatonic commentator, Porphyry. Aspects of this topic do intersect in important ways with the discourses on material goods that I examine; in particular, I will discuss how Boethius's use of the term habitus to describe his protagonist's clothing in the Consolatio invites comparison with his earlier translation of Aristotle's concept of habitus in the Categories. My larger endeavor in this chapter, however, lies more clearly in studying how Boethius's text investigates the practical objects of material culture and their effect on human behavior and self-knowledge, rather than the philosophical classifications of the abstract qualities of those objects. In Boethius's text, I argue, the trope of stripping and adorning delineates a particular cyclical human habit of thought and practice regarding the human accumulation of and attachment to material goods, one that constructs the self in terms of its embodied acquisition of external goods and that experiments with the interrelated concepts of having, wearing, and being (from Latin habere: to have, to wear, to be). My analysis here relies on postmodern theories of objects as well as on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, a concept that is related in interesting ways to Boethius's earlier use of the term and that helps to explain how human experiences of change and accident are structured and determined by cultural factors, especially in a class-based society such as the one represented by Fortune.

Implicit in my argument is the conviction that Boethius's curiosity about adornment as a fundamental manifestation of Fortune's changeable goods profoundly influenced and informed literary treatments of clothing in high- and late-medieval culture. As I will discuss in chapter 2, vernacular writers in these periods were especially fascinated by the Consolatio's practical lessons about the mutability of material goods, and they inherited from Boethius a particular (vestimentary) way of conceptualizing their relationship with those goods. By first spending the time to examine Boethius's Consolatio in his own milieu, I am deferring for the moment the issue of precise literary borrowing of that text, whose meaning was interceded by later commentaries, translations, and Latin editions, so that I can explore how Boethius transformed the matter of clothing as he found it in his own culture. In his use of Fortune, I demonstrate, Boethius takes a recognized classical trope for transience and materialism and invests it with a much broader network of images and meanings, so that experiences of personal alteration, of material possession and loss, of large social change, and even of the individual's place in divine order can be understood through the singular image of the goods-qua-clothing that Fortune strips off the poet-protagonist's back. Together, the main motifs that I will now examine—Fortune's ever-turning wheel, the
protagonist’s lost garment, Philosophy’s allegorical robe, and the ‘design’ of
divine Providence—present the trope of changing clothing as one way to
examine the vexed question of the human condition in the material world.

THE WHEEL OF MATERIAL GOODS

Fortune’s iconic ever-turning wheel is the most overt symbol of the human
experience of material goods in Boethius’s text, juxtaposing as it does the
unrelenting pace of human acquisitiveness with the inherent impermanence
of worldly things. In Fortune’s words (via Philosophy):

Nos ad constantiam nostris moribus alienam inexpleta hominum cupidi-
tas alligabit? Haece nostra uis est, hunc continuum ludum ludimus: rotam
uolubili orbe uersamus, infima summis, summa infimis mutare gaudemus.

[Shall I, then, permit man’s insatiable cupidity to tie me down to a same-
ness alien to my habits? Here is the source of my power, the game I always
play: I spin my wheel and find pleasure in raising the low to a high place
and lowering those who were on top.]7

Fortune’s wheel is so often connected in medieval culture to the gains and
losses of kings and rulers—those who have the most to lose—that we might
lose touch with the notion that her wheel in fact pertains to all people: that
is, that it relates not just to having a lot, but also, and more broadly, to the
notion of having itself. While Chaucer, for example, glosses his translation
of this passage in his Boece with an introduction of the notion of tragedy,
his definition of the term is decidedly utilitarian: he writes (via Trevet): “[t]
ragedye is to seyn a dite of a prosperite for a tyme, that endeth in wrec-
chidnesse.”8 On a fundamental level the cycle depicted by Fortune’s wheel
reflects the experience of what D. Vance Smith calls in another context the
“tragedy of possession,” that is, the unnerving and often destabilizing circum-
stances brought forth by acquiring, losing, exchanging, desiring, or just plain
“trying to make sense of” material possession.9 The fluctuations of having
or losing possessions had concrete sociopolitical manifestations, of course,
especially, as I will discuss in chapter 2, in the context of an emerging con-
sumer culture that coincided with the burgeoning mercantile economies and
new social mobility of high- and late-medieval Europe. What interests me
here, however, is the way Fortune’s iconography taps into a robust ancient
and late-antique network of cultural associations linking the human condi-
tion and the cycle of desire for and attachment to material goods. A look at this tradition suggests that the motion of the wheel represents not only the fluctuations of one’s literal holdings but also the slippery experience of living in a culture whose social and even spiritual operations and narratives are rooted unequivocally in cyclical economies of gain and loss, and change and exchange.

The wheel of Fortune has early ties to the Orphic wheel, a Greek symbol related to the doctrine of metempsychosis, or reincarnation, in which the human soul is imagined as wandering back and forth from a higher existence to a lower one, over and over, as if on a turning wheel. Plato connects the cycle of metempsychosis to the corruptibility of matter itself; the immortal soul succumbs to the cycle of rebirth by literally falling from the divine realm to earth, where it is subjected to the vicissitudes of matter and “perpetually undergoes all sorts of changes.” Once reborn in a material body, the soul’s level of involvement with and attachment to material objects of pleasure or pain ensures the degree of its fusion with that body—its literal incorporation—and also the degree of its longing for “the physical” (the material) in its next life and next cycle on the wheel. Neoplatonists likewise taught that all things progress in a circular movement of creation from and return to the Source, the One, and the Good; the more the soul serves the passions of the body and the imperfect matter of the world, the more isolated it becomes from this Good. Again and again this cyclical nature of the relation between subject and object emerges in the historical study of mankind’s participation with its external and material environment: in Hegelian philosophy, consciousness stems from the cycles of creation and alienation by which humans form and then interact with the world around them; in Lacanian psychoanalysis this connection is discussed in terms of the Thing, that primordial lost object that is not only the site of desire but also the site of the drives—especially the death drive, as Slavoj Žižek reminds us, the recurring desire to return to an original, inorganic state—which forever circle around the object, never to be satisfied. More recently the iconography of the Eastern wheel of life—often thought of as a source for later Western versions—has been read as a model for understanding consumer cycles and especially the cycle of consumer desire.

As one of the guiding symbols in the Consolatio through which human beings are to understand their relationship to the material world around them, Boethius’s trope of Fortune’s wheel engages many of these same elements. For instance, the pining, self-pitying state in which the protagonist first appears epitomizes the notion of the (Neo)Platonic soul weighed down by the mortal body’s material, worldly attachments. When we first meet
the protagonist Boethius in the opening verse of the *Consolatio* he is deeply invested in longing for his own death. Partway into the first poem, however, we see that this condition is in fact merely an extension of his longing for the former goods (including a youthful body) that he enjoyed while in Fortune’s good graces and has since lost:

\[
\text{Dum leuibus male fida bonis fortuna faueret}
\]
\[
\text{paene caput tristis merserat hora meum;}
\]
\[
\text{Nunc quia fallacem mutauit nubila uultum}
\]
\[
\text{protrahit ingratas impia uita moras.}
\]

[The sad hour that nearly drowned me came just at the time that faithless Fortune favored me with her worthless gifts. Now that she has clouded her deceitful face, my accursed life seems to go on endlessly.]

While the text starts with Fortune’s role in this most immediately material of human cycles of having and losing—that is, the deterioration and death of the mortal body—it later compares Fortune’s unceasing material changes with humankind’s large-scale cyclical appetite for material things. When Philosophy famously ventriloquizes Fortune’s voice to illustrate the goddess’s rhetorical positioning, for example, she repeatedly makes clear that it is man’s “insatiable greed,” his chronic “thirst for possessions,” that necessitates the constancy—in the form of constant gifts—so often demanded from the goddess. Regardless of the number or type of gift, Fortune complains, new desires for possessions always reoccur:

\[
\text{sed quaesita uorans saeua rapacitas}
\]
\[
\text{alios pandit hiatus.}
\]
\[
\text{Quae iam praecipitem frena cupidinem}
\]
\[
\text{certo fine retentent,}
\]
\[
\text{largis cum potius muneribus fluens}
\]
\[
\text{sitis ardescit habendi?}
\]
\[
\text{Numquam diues agit qui trepidus gemens}
\]
\[
\text{sesse credit egentem.}
\]

[Ravenous greed would devour everything and then discover other wants. No bridle can restrain man’s disordered desires within reasonable bounds. Even when he is filled with great favors, he burns with thirst for more. No man can be rich who cries fearfully and considers himself to be poor.]
Boethius’s original question about the randomness of fate is thus turned into an assessment of human desire in response to the circulation of goods; how different, the protagonist seems to be asked, is Fortune’s changeable, fickle wheel from your own random yet recurring desires? Underlying this question is the suggestion—reiterated throughout this text—that wealth is a state of being rather than having; that a rich man, and a happy man, is one who perceives himself as such.

The extent to which the protagonist Boethius (along with humankind in general) misunderstands and displaces his own cycles of longing for material goods and the power and status they bring is thus the starting point and foundation of the early books of the *Consolatio*, and the theme continues throughout the second half of the work, albeit in a different direction and tenor. Whereas in the earlier, ‘physical’ books of the *Consolatio*, as I have just described, Philosophy challenges the protagonist’s notion of Fortune’s wheel by associating it with his own corresponding cycles of bodily deterioration and consumer desire, in the later, more ‘metaphysical’ books, she effectively replaces the notion of Fortune’s wheel altogether with another image of a turning wheel said to steer human experience. The human longing for artificial material goods, she explains, is merely a misguided attempt to satiate the natural human longing for true Good, which manifests itself as a circular return to one’s origins:

Repetunt proprios quaeque recursus  
redituque suo singula gaudent  
nec manet ulli traditus ordo  
nisi quod fini iunxerit ortum  
stabilemque sui fecerit orbem.

[Thus all things seek again their proper courses, and rejoice when they return to them. The only stable order in things is that which connects the beginning to the end and keeps itself on a steady course.]^{19}

This circular path correlates to the Platonic cycle of the soul; for as Philosophy later explains more directly, it is also the path to God.^{20} The effect of this shift in the *Consolatio*’s use of wheel symbolism is to reveal a series of basic truths using the notion of Fortune’s wheel: that humans feel desire, that desire is recurring and recursive; that humans displace their desire for the *sumnum bonum* onto artificial goods, and that in so doing they mistakenly believe that their fates are controlled by the wheel of chance when they are in
fact controlled by their own desire for God and the recurring movement of their souls toward God. As Boethius makes clear even in his rhyme scheme in the passage quoted above, the wheel, or *orbis*, of things is—contrary to the popular notions of the goddess Fortune—inherently connected to both divine order (*ordo*) and beginnings (*ortus*).

I have been arguing that Boethius’s wheel imagery in the *Consolatio* organizes a particular narrative about the human relationship with and perception of material goods, and that it does this not only in its symbolic function as a figure for worldly changeability but also in Boethius’s development of the wheel imagery as a guiding trope throughout his text. While my primary interest lies in examining how this imagery facilitates the other major symbolic feature of Fortune’s wheel, her power over clothing, to which I will now turn, it is important to note that the association between the cycles of matter and the cycles of longing that I describe here can be found throughout the Middle Ages. For while medieval Christian culture did not, barring a few notable exceptions, subscribe to the Platonic worldview of ‘eternal return’ in which the transmigration of souls played such a key role, it did use the symbol of the wheel in myriad ways to explore the cyclical nature of human involvement with the transient material world—both the literal material body and the longing that comes with it.21 This can be seen in the types of wheel iconography that were most clearly associated with Fortune’s wheel, such as the aforementioned wheel of life and the rose window, each of which has been shown to use the image of the wheel to explore on the one hand the progression of man toward death and on the other the futility of his grasping for worldly power and goods.22 Moreover, as the wheel of Fortune became more Christianized—in the sense that its vacillations became more often linked to human vices than to random fate—it more implicitly informed (and was informed by) other genres of wheels concerned with the cycle of material desires, including the various wheels of vices and of the cardinal sins evoked by moralists, the interlinked wheels of desire and temperance, and especially the wheel of worldly concupiscence.23

**BOETHIUS’S HABITUS**

While Boethius’s *Consolatio* uses wheel iconography to reveal the cyclical movement of goods in the world and of corresponding human desires, it uses clothing and ornament to analyze the material medium of those changing goods and the process of human attachment to them. Boethius was not the first writer to imagine Fortune’s process of worldly changeability in terms of
vestimentary possession and dispossession, but he changed this trope in crucial ways. Lucian’s *Menippus*, a work known to have influenced the *Consolatio*, provides one of the earliest and most comprehensive portraits of Fortune’s vestimentary powers of transformation. The text narrates the main character’s journey into Hades, during which Menippus, struck by the disturbing indistinguishability of human skeletons stripped of their trappings, states the following:

[I]t seemed to me that human life is like a long pageant, and that all its trappings are supplied and distributed by Fortune, who arrays the participants in various costumes of many colors . . . And often, in the very midst of the pageant, she exchanges the costumes of several players; instead of allowing them to finish the pageant in the parts that had been assigned to them, she re-apparels them, forcing Croesus to assume the dress of a slave and captive, and shifting Maeandrius, who formerly paraded among the servants, into the imperial habit of Polycrates . . . Some however, are so ungrateful that when Fortune appears to them and asks for her trappings back, they are vexed and indignant, as if they were being robbed of their own property, instead of giving back what they had borrowed for a little time.24

Lucian’s text imagines clothing as a type of spectacular ornament that is the primary tool through which Fortune achieves her powers of alteration. He presents three crucial aspects of clothing’s power as an agent of change which are later echoed by medieval writers: first and foremost, he highlights its superior ability to enact social status, so that king and slave, master and servant, need only to trade costumes in order to experience a reversal of fortunes (“I suppose that the show must needs be diversified,” Menippus quips).25 Second, he illustrates its role as property—of a most personal kind—that best represents the inherent human misunderstanding of goods as permanent fixtures of the self (and the corresponding trauma when such permanence is lost).26 Third, by having Menippus speak the above words when he observes, Hamlet-like, the anonymity of the human skeleton, Lucian underscores the symbolic importance of clothing to understanding the cycle of life and death.27 Thus, like the symbolism of Fortune’s wheel, which conflates the human cycle of life with the human desire for possessions, Fortune’s costumes themselves represent not merely the goods of the world bestowed on individuals and the symbolic capital those goods bring, but also a cultural rhythm of material gaining and losing, of possession and dispossession, that is intimately associated with the cycle of life and death.
Boethius’s influential version of the same image keeps Lucian’s association of Fortune’s garments with property ownership and the cycle of life, but downplays the main theme of the sartorial performance of social status, focusing instead on the rich imagistic potential of Fortune’s ornamental gifts in relation to the trope of purity and nakedness. Boethius’s Fortune (‘played’ by Philosophy) describes her goods as a type of nourishing adornment that she provided the naked and helpless protagonist upon his birth, and that she now decides to take back:

Cum te matris utero produxit, nudum rebus omnibus inopemque suscepi, meis opibus fui et, quod te nunc impatientem nostri facit, fauore prona indulgentius educai, omnium quae mei iuris sunt affluentia et splendore circumdedi. Nunc mihi rethare manum libet.

[When Nature produced you from your mother’s womb, I found you naked and lacking in everything. I nourished you with my abundant gifts, and, being inclined to favor you (an attitude which you now seem to hold against me), I endowed you with all the affluence and splendor in my power. Now it pleases me to withdraw my favor.]

Here Fortune’s gifts are situated more clearly in relation to cultural, Stoic-influenced notions of excess and artifice: her gifts are not merely costumes that might be randomly exchanged at any point during the drama of life, but constitute anything that is added to enhance the human figure (and satisfy its appetite) after its formative creation. Fortune’s gifts are presented as pure ornament, an afterthought inherently secondary to birth and being. Moreover, augmenting this idea of Fortune’s ornamental gifts to others in this book is her own embodiment of ornament, wherein her deceitfulness is specifically described in cosmetic terms—as *fuci*: paint, dyes, or rouges—and where her monsterness, *prodigium*, is linguistically aligned to her prodigal, *prodigus*, nature: “Intellego multiformes illius prodigii fucos” [I know well the manifold disguises of that monster (II.pr.1.3)], says Philosophy shortly before she takes on Fortune’s voice.

In Boethius’s passage above, the seeming echo of Job 1:21 (“Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away”) underscores the extent to which clothing acted as a symbolic catch-all for worldly goods and material existence as general concepts in medieval Western culture, as well as the extent to which the binary image of the clothed/naked body had achieved iconic status among early Christian writers as a metaphor for life and death. Undoubtedly it
also introduces the suggestion that Fortune's goods are a Job-like testing of human resolve in the face of both material superfluity and dearth, a suggestion that Boethius continues to build on in the *Consolatio* until Fortune's gifts—or rather, the loss of Fortune's gifts—are presented, by the end of the text, as instruments for spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. As I state above, the *Consolatio* is, for all intents and purposes, a book about a man literally stripped of his possessions. Yet Boethius does not approach his fundamental sartorial trope the way some of his predecessors do. He transforms the sartorial swapping of social status between emperor and slave that we see in Lucian into a meditation on enslavement as the metaphorical space of material desires and possession. Likewise, he largely avoids the overt gendering of ornament found in his predecessors—male ornament targeted by the early Stoics and female ornament castigated by the church fathers—in favor of exploring the universal experience of adornment as a phenomenological patterning of enclosure and exposure, acquisition and loss.

Clothing and ornamentation take a surprising number of forms in the relatively low-impact sartorial imagery of Boethius's text, but most examples work toward an understanding of the shared human experience of garments and all goods. Rather than use clothing terms with specific cultural connotations in the late-antique period, for example, Boethius uses generic versions: his most common word for clothing is *vestis* (garment or dress). Philosophy's much-discussed garment is a *vestis* (I.pr.1.3) rather than a more specific female *stola* or *palla*; likewise the coveted clothing singled out for recrimination in Book II prosa 5 is also *vestis* (II.pr.5.17) rather than any number of other terms that could be used: *tunica* or *dalmatica* for under- and overtunics; *pallium*, *lacerna*, *paenula*, or *saegum* for different kinds of cloaks; let alone decorations such as stripes (*clavi*), medallions (*orbiculi*), or squares (*tabulae*) often added to these garments. Boethius's own attire is referred to as *habitus* (I.pr.4.4), a word whose importance I will discuss at depth below, but which similarly refuses socioeconomic distinction regarding either his formerly lavish garments as *magister officiorum* or his current lowly prison garb. Luxurious clothes are also referred to by generic terms such as *cultus* (IV.m.2.4), and purple robes of emperors are described as generically purple (IV.m.2.2) or Tyrian (II.m.4.1), rather than, for example, as the *paludamentum* actually worn by the emperor. Likewise, ornament is described by its general term—*ornamentum* (II.pr.5.26, 30)—rather than through descriptions of particular ornamental objects. While clearly interested in forms of adornment, that is, Boethius completely avoids describing or even discussing the specific and dramatic Byzantine fashions of the age, through which Roman dress began to take on the patterned designs of the Syrians and the
other exotic fabrics and colors of the East; in fact the Roman toga—which, despite Tertullian’s call for a shift to the pallium, was still the heart of Roman citizenship, even if only worn mostly for official occasions at this point—is not mentioned once by name in Boethius’s text. By repeatedly drawing attention to clothing but not to precise or historicized fashions, Boethius offers a philosophical meditation on the fact of clothing (or clothing-as-good) rather than on its cultural values: he analyzes the mundane, almost imperceptible features of having (material goods) that are usually forgotten in the face of the sociocultural codes embedded in the wearing of these objects. Focusing not on the luxury element of Fortune’s goods, but on the largely unseen properties of all goods, Boethius makes clear that a fundamental element of Fortune’s cycle of give and take—her literal encircling of men, circumdatum, with riches—is the effect it has on people: that is, the lingering attachment that humans have to goods once they are gone, and, most importantly, the potential for intervention that this moment of unexpected loss or despoilment presents.

The indirect and implicit manner in which objects promote human attachment has been explored by a number of contemporary theorists. The process of enculturation that Bourdieu has termed the habitus, for example, is sustained through the goods of the world by way of the interconnected practices of objectification and embodiment. According to Bourdieu, mental structures are inextricably connected to the objects that shape them and that they shape: “the mental structures which construct the world of objects are constructed in the practice of a world of objects constructed according to the same structures.” Just as meaning is objectified in things, so the structure of things, and especially “the seemingly most insignificant details of dress, bearing, physical and verbal manners,” what he earlier calls “[p]ersonal style,” incorporates meaning into bodily memory and practice. The unconsciously internalized aspect of this process offers the most instructive glimpse into the subtle workings of human reliance on such goods. Like Bourdieu’s habitus, Daniel Miller’s discussion of the “humility” of objects, Bill Brown’s concept of the “thingness” of objects, and Grant McCracken’s notions of the “inevitability” of objects all maintain the important Heideggerian realization that a large part of the significance of objects lies in their ability, most of the time, to not be seen. As Miller puts it: “The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations by setting the scene and ensuring normative behavior, without being open to challenge. They determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so.” In a similar way Grant McCracken discusses the way goods work to concretize culture, persuading
its inhabitants of cultural categories, principles, and ideologies: “When culture appears in objects,” he says, “it seeks to make itself appear inevitable, as the only sensible terms in which anyone can constitute their world. Culture uses objects to convince.”

Boethius’s careful examination of this systemic yet ephemeral nature of the human reliance on material objects can be seen not only through his depiction of Fortune’s control over garments and goods, but also in the unique way that he challenges the materiality of Fortune herself. Despite being the purveyor of all material things and the primary subject of much of the Consolatio, and despite arguing her case against the protagonist in her own words (via Philosophy’s prosopopeia), Fortune, as is well known, is never actually materially present in the text’s frame narrative. Although this conspicuous absence has traditionally been read as Boethius’s attempt to deny the goddess power and realism, the device achieves other ends as well, bringing attention to the invisibility of Fortune’s material mechanisms, which, like her goods themselves, are so inherent, insidious, and intangible that they are barely intelligible. The dramatized present-absence of Fortune’s body and goods in Boethius’s text thus invokes a structure of practices very like Bourdieu’s largely unseen yet ever-present habitus, which, like Fortune herself, “makes coherence and necessity out of accident and contingency.”

In fact, Bourdieu’s theoretical notion of the habitus originated (via Panofsky, and via Aquinas) in a text that Boethius knew intimately and was responsible for transmitting to the medieval West, Aristotle’s Categories. This text has been shown to have had a crucial role in marking the emergence of “things” themselves in human consciousness, and Boethius’s influential translation of and commentaries upon it not only became standard textbooks in medieval scholastic culture but also sparked the great metaphysical debate about things and their characteristics, the medieval problem of universals. Aristotle discusses the concept of the habitus (Gk. hexis; which Boethius translates as de modis habere) as one of the ten categories of being outlined in his Categories. Boethius’s translation relates the state of habitus (having, possessing) to conditions or dispositions both qualitative and quantitative, both intellectual and corporeal: habitus relates to “having” knowledge and virtue [dicimur enim disciplinam aliquam habere et virtutem] as well as “having” a physical height of five or six feet [dicitur enim tricubitam magnitudinem habere vel quadricubitum]; it relates to “having” things in a container [Aut tanquam in vase] or “having” possessions such as a house and field [Aut tanquam possessionem, habere enim domum aut agrum dicimur]; and finally, it encompasses “having” things on the body, such as a cloak or tunic [Aut tanquam ea quae circa corpus sunt, ut vestimentum
vel tunicam]. This section of Aristotle’s text concludes the *Categories*, and Boethius’s translation makes clear the slippery and ubiquitous nature of this “mode” of having and its potential as a theory of human behavior and experience. At a fundamental level, by using the Latin word *habere* (to have, to be, to wear) in addition to Aristotle’s own vestimentary examples, Boethius’s translation forcefully suggests the extent to which wearing is semantically and conceptually inseparable from *being*.

Turning back to his *Consolatio*, we can see the term *habitus* repeatedly used in a way that plays with this same double meaning, so that *habitus* connotes simultaneously the subject’s garments and his overall condition of being. We see this duality, for example, early on in Book I when a self-pitying Boethius charges Philosophy with not noticing that his circumstances have drastically changed since she last saw him: “Talis habitus talisque uultus erat, cum te cum naturae secreta rimarer” [Was my condition / state of dress like this, or my countenance, when I studied nature’s mysteries with you?]. The problematized status of Boethius’s actual attire in this text is a subject to which I will return, but for now I would like to point out the important way that Boethius’s use of *habitus* seems to tie together the main philosophical threads of the text. If *habitus* identifies the protagonist’s vestments, it also identifies his disease—both elements, Philosophy makes clear, which stem from Fortune’s cycle of having and losing. Thus at the beginning of Book II, before addressing the nature of Fortune, Philosophy tells the protagonist: “Si penitus aegritudinis tuae causas habitumque cognoui, fortunae prioris affectu desiderioque tabescis” [If I understand the causes of your diseased condition, you are suffering from the absence of your former good fortune]. It is, moreover, Philosophy’s own *habitus* that is stolen and worn by the warring philosophical sects who tear pieces from her dress. As these examples show, like Bourdieu’s *habitus*, Boethius’s use of the term seems to muddy the subject/object divide, asking the protagonist (and reader) to investigate more deeply these boundaries and the apparent truths that they represent. As we will see later, Boethius’s interest in the clothing—being juxtaposition that *habitus* signifies—again, like Bourdieu’s concept—also obfuscates the binary opposition between determinism and individual autonomy; Boethius’s “condition” or *habitus* comes from his own inner longing for material goods (or *fortunae*), but these are goods that, as we learn later in the text, Fortune distributes or rescinds according to a much larger and all-encompassing divine plan. The sartorial question with which this text begins becomes the meeting point between free will and divine predestination at which it ends.
Along with the structural programs of the changing wheel and the changing *habitus*, Boethius’s text offers another discourse on materiality: a rigorous interrogation of material goods themselves with regard to the dominant material object of the *Consolatio*, Lady Philosophy’s garment. In the narrative frame of the *Consolatio*, this tutorial on materiality begins almost immediately with the ambiguous material presence of Philosophy, whose visual appearance in the first book of the text is presented as inextricable from Boethius’s own foggy mental state. The protagonist’s famous difficulty in trying to identify the physical characteristics of Philosophy—old or young, average height or supernaturally tall—points not only to the divine potential of this figure who defies all definition but also, I would argue, to the inherent changeability of the material register itself. By the end of the *Consolatio*, the protagonist’s focus on the nature of the material world has been ostensibly supplanted by a focus on his own process of knowledge: “Everything which is known is known not according to its own power,” says Philosophy to the protagonist in Book V, “but rather according to capacity of the knower” [omne enim quod cognoscitur non secundum sui uim sed secundum cognoscendum potius comprehenditur facultatem]. Early in the text, however, when the protagonist is still burdened by worldly concerns, this lesson is generated through provocative material objects designed to challenge the protagonist’s assumptions regarding material goods and regarding his own material circumstances.

Philosophy’s garment, which takes up more than half of her opening description, is the earliest and most prominent example:

*Her clothes were made of imperishable material, of the finest thread woven with the most delicate skill. (Later she told me that she had made them with her own hands.) Their color, however, was obscured by a kind of film*
as of long neglect, like smoke-grimed masks. On the bottom hem could be read the embroidered Greek letter Pi, and on the top hem the Greek letter Theta. Between the two a ladder of steps rose from the lower to the higher letter. Her dress had been torn by the hands of marauders who had each carried off such pieces as he could get.\(^{47}\)

Philosophy’s garment demonstrates a fundamental conflict in the representative function of material objects. On the one hand the garment represents indestructible Platonic wisdom, the $\pi$ and $\theta$ symbolizing practical and theoretical philosophy (that is, looking into the nature of things and speculating about them, which Boethius also describes in his commentary on Porphyry), and the ladder representing the progression from one to the other, the very journey that will shortly be undertaken by the protagonist Boethius in this text. On the other hand, these Greek symbols of learning have been coated with a dirty film of disdain and neglect; the “imperishable” robe has in fact been violently torn and ravaged.\(^{48}\) As scholars have long noted, these secondary details point allegorically to the neglect and abuse of philosophical truth.\(^{49}\) Yet, importantly, Boethius’s subtle details accomplish this allegory by situating the garment in the world of mundane, material objects with their own history of physical wear and tear. Like Philosophy herself, the garment is both there and not there, both a figure for the protagonist’s mental journey and a physical object upon which he gazes and with which he interacts. While the allegorical function of the garment tends to draw more immediate attention, the materiality of the garment, coupled with its situatedness as an object of analysis in the text, tells a striking story. The protagonist, stripped of all his possessions and thrown into an empty cell, suddenly finds this one last material good—the only object actually described on the diegetic level of the storyline, the only object depicted as physically present with him in his cell—at his disposal. In this way Philosophy’s garment goes beyond representing the path he must take; it is the path. As the ultimate object of practical philosophical inquiry, the garment offers the protagonist a crucial final experience of material goods and materiality, an exquisitely desired, invaluable thing turned torn and dirty that will help him examine, ponder, and ultimately turn away from goods altogether.

The garment achieves this role primarily through its underacknowledged, more “material” features. Like Bill Brown’s exemplary dirty window, which alerts the viewer to the window’s heretofore ignored materiality, the dirty film and visible tears on Philosophy’s robe change the apparent function of the garment, forcing its viewer to see it anew. For Brown, objects that stop functioning in the way they are intended complicate the process of interpretation;
such an object stops being a mere object within the larger code of objects by which we live our lives and instead becomes a more complex “thing,” a material object that has the potential to illuminate the complicated, often inscrutable problem of matter and materiality in relation to subjectivity. That such thingness, moreover, represents a moment of change—in Brown’s words, “when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily”—further resembles the role played by Philosophy’s enigmatic dress and by clothing in general in Boethius’s text. For it is the moment in which Philosophy literally touches her dress to Boethius’s eyes that brings about the most dramatic and iconic change in the Consolatio, one repeated over and over in later medieval texts—that is, the sudden clarity of first recognition:

Sui paulisper oblitus est. Recordabitur facile, si quidem nos ante cognouerit; quod ut possit, paulisper lumina eius mortalium rerum nube caligantia tergamus. Haec dixit oculosque meos fletibus undantes contracta in rugam ueste siccauit.

[“He has forgotten for a while who he is, but he will soon remember once he has recognized me. To make it easier for him I will wipe a little of the blinding cloud of worldly concern from his eyes.” And as she spoke she gathered her dress into a fold and wiped from my eyes the tears that filled them.]51

The transformation effected by this action propels the Consolatio toward its philosophical and narrative purpose: Boethius not only suddenly recognizes Philosophy as his former physician, nurse, and teacher, thus seeing things wholly differently; he also is able to speak directly for the first time in the text, and thus to engage in the dialogue that makes up the rest—that is, the vast majority—of the Consolatio. Importantly then, this garment’s initial role in the protagonist’s road toward enlightenment lies not in its Greek symbols of learning but in its most material and mundane of functions: that of a worn dress that records its own physical corruption, and that of a dry cloth wiping away tears. The material garment—or rather, the materiality of the garment—is literally the spark that enables the intellectual and spiritual journey in the first place.

On a fundamental level, as tropes that attempt to make invisible and abstract concepts visible and concrete though material representation, allegorical figures intrinsically interrogate the fraught relationship between
things and ideas, the material and the immaterial. A text Boethius likely knew well, Macrobius’s *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* [*Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*] epitomizes the key role that sartorial symbolism plays in this process, describing how divinities preferred to be presented physically, complete with “amicus ornatusque varios corpus non habentibus” [various clothes and ornaments, though they had no bodies]. By nature allegorical figures are always pointing to their own material, corporeal absence, an aspect both heightened and deflected by lavish descriptions of their surface ornament. Joel Fineman discusses this inherent emptiness of allegory in terms of its apparent structural concreteness, arguing that a systemic deferral of meaning and truth exists behind allegory’s appearance of stability, and that this “structure of continual yearning” and “insatiable desire” corresponds to the introduction of death into the world (via Adam’s Fall). More recently Daniel Tiffany has approached the subject from another direction, exploring not how allegory enacts materialism, but how material objects can act allegorically, as “automata” that awaken a viewer’s curiosity regarding the metaphysical truth behind the surface of the object, yet which—like allegory itself—always ultimately reveal absence rather than answers. Philosophy’s garment does each of these things. On the one hand its long-abandoned Greek symbols of wisdom perform an abstract longing for truth that, as I discuss in more depth below, brings the protagonist’s own impending death before him. On the other hand, as a personified figure Philosophy also inherently points to her own material absence and to the emptiness at the heart of the allegorical project, and thus the surface materiality of her dress necessarily takes up the role of the automaton that incites curiosity about more immaterial pursuits.

In stark contrast to its own “everlasting fabric,” for example, Philosophy’s garment repeatedly calls attention to the protagonist Boethius’s looming death—to his own impending material absence. As Henry Chadwick pointed out some time ago, prison clothes during this period were marked with a *theta* for *thanatos* to symbolize the death penalty, and thus there is a good possibility that Boethius himself (author and protagonist) was wearing a *theta* on his garment that is both mirrored by and countered by Philosophy’s own. Moreover, while on the one hand the dark film covering Philosophy’s clothing relates conceptually to the dark cloud of worldly concern in Boethius’s own eyes, because of which he cannot at first recognize Philosophy or her teachings, it also corresponds to a more culturally laden and materially charged image: that of the soot-covered funeral masks (*fumosas imagines*) to which her clothed figure is explicitly likened in the same opening description. Such masks of deceased male ancestors were the unifying symbol of Roman
funeral rituals, worn by carefully chosen mourners in funeral processions to both celebrate the greatness of the past and to lament the impermanence of the world; after their public use the masks were hung in the atriums of Roman households, where they accumulated soot from the hearth fire until they were needed again.\textsuperscript{57} The implication that Philosophy resembles one of these masks is highly suggestive. For one, it implies that Philosophy’s appearance is more than a philosophical primer to cure Boethius of his intellectual illness and to prepare him for his imminent death: it implies that she is part of a larger spectacle of that death, there to authorize and instigate a farewell to material existence as well as materialist thinking.\textsuperscript{58} What Boethius sees when he first looks at her is the ghoulish image of his own funeral procession.

If the association of Philosophy’s garment with funeral masks or \textit{imagines} asks Boethius to confront his own death, to raise metaphysical questions about the physical world, it also adds to the fetishistic scrutiny of Philosophy’s material surface that I discuss above with respect to other details of the garment. As a personification Philosophy already effectively enacts the role of the masked figure: “personification,” from the Greek \textit{prosopopeia}, originally referred to the dramatic performances that used masks (Lat. \textit{personae}, Gr. \textit{prosopa}) to stage feelings, an etymology that Boethius not only knew well but discussed at length elsewhere in his writings.\textsuperscript{59} To compare a personification to another mask—or better yet, to suggest that an already personified figure also wears a mask, a mask meant to impersonate a dead (inanimate) person, no less—is to metatextually point to the figure’s multiple layers of “thingness”: Philosophy becomes all surface, all adornment, a mask behind a mask that wears a type of there-but-not-there clothing over her clothing. This effect is further heightened when Philosophy actualizes the other meaning of \textit{prosopopeia} by taking on—quite suddenly—the voice of Fortune in Book II, thus performing the role of yet another kind of shell object, a mouth-piece or instrument for voicing Fortune’s alternate ideology. The \textit{Consolatio}’s hypercritical attention to Philosophy’s garment and related surface performances draws our attention not just to the question of her materiality and the materiality of her garment, but also to our own assumptions about and interpretations of material goods. For instance, while Philosophy’s scrutinized material presence marks her clearly as the foil of the materially absent Fortune, this binary presents an odd reversal of expectations: surely one would expect Fortune, the goddess of material goods, to be fetishized materially, and Philosophy, the embodiment of philosophical knowledge, to transcend material matters.

The dramatic physical presence of Philosophy’s garment fades after its initial role as an object of inquiry in Book I, as the protagonist progresses
toward more theoretical questions that originated in large part with the garment itself. Yet while Boethius’s use of Philosophy’s garment as a figure for the protagonist’s own mental journey speaks to the tradition of integumentum in personification allegory, it suggestively alters the central trope, ultimately moving the spotlight from the veiled female figure back to the dispossessed protagonist. Understood together, for example, the descriptions of Philosophy’s attire that I have addressed here are as much concerned with how the garment itself might be lost—to age, to neglect, to fading memory, to poachers and thieves—as they are with the promise of what lies beneath it (i.e., the philosophical truth unveiled by the hermeneutic process). In this program of material change and loss, Philosophy’s garment always points back to the material losses experienced by the protagonist just prior to writing his text. Whereas, for example, Philosophy’s garment presents her stoic steadfastness in the face of material neglect and abuse, Boethius complains vociferously about the change in his material circumstances; whereas Philosophy’s ornamental Theta represents the heights of metaphysical knowledge, Boethius’s own (potential) Theta corresponds to his imprisonment and death penalty; whereas Philosophy seems wrapped in a confounding double veil, the Job-like Boethius has been veritably stripped of all his possessions. By comparison, the only thing we know for certain about Boethius’s own attire is that it has changed, as he makes clear when he demands of Philosophy whether his habitus is the same as when she last saw him (I.pr.4.4). And we know that this change, along with other material changes, creates both the impetus for and the subject of the Consolatio. Philosophy’s garment thus also suggests that the images of clothing and adornment in this text cannot be separated from the underlying question of what a subject becomes when he is stripped of his objects.

**ORNAMENT AND ORDER**

The Consolatio works toward an answer for the larger question about the stripped subject by examining the function of ornament and material possession in mortal and divine power structures, with particular focus on the notions of freedom and free will. This discussion directly invokes the paradigm of freedom and imprisonment associated with the traditional philosopher’s cloak. Like Tertullian’s earlier investigation of his own change to wearing the philosopher’s pallium that I discuss in my introduction, Boethius’s investigation of the despoiled subject cannot help but be informed by the asceticism made famous by his self-identified hero in the Consolatio, Socrates.
The protagonist's voiced longing for his former clothing—the ornate robes of the *magister officiorum*, we might assume—obviously stands in stark contrast to the simple, single *pallium* that Socrates is repeatedly said to have worn, and that Tertullian subsequently promoted. The legend of Socrates' *pallium* was used by early philosophers to explore the conceptual link between ornament and human freedom; in defending his sparse sartorial aesthetic in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, for example, Socrates upends conventional thinking about material goods, arguing that the ornaments marking the wealth of the free man in actuality enslave that person to the body's desires. In Plato's *Phaedo*, a text that dramatizes Socrates' final hours and death in the jail at Athens, Socrates uses the metaphor of adornment to discuss the Platonic freeing of the soul from the imprisonment of the body:

That is the reason why a man should be of good cheer about his own soul, if during life he has cast away the pleasures of the body and its ornamentation as of no concern to him and doing him more harm than good, but has seriously concerned himself with the pleasures of learning, and adorned his soul not with alien but with its own ornaments, namely, moderation, righteousness, courage, freedom, and truth, and in that state awaits his journey to the underworld.

When, facing his own imminent death in jail in Pavia several centuries later, Boethius draws on similar imagery and terminology, tying an underlying trope of adornment to his governing theme of imprisonment, he proposes a deeper exploration of the role ornament plays in freedom. Free beings, Philosophy says at the beginning of Book V, are first and foremost those who have the power to distinguish between what should be desired and what should be avoided (V.pr.2); thus, when subjects find themselves enslaved by their desires, she further explains, they have in fact become captives of their own freedom [*libertate captiuae* (V.pr.2.10)]. The locus of this paradoxical freedom/imprisonment is the bodily ornament waiting to be thrown off or stripped away: the human subject is on the one hand like a tamed Carthaginian lion who will throw off its decorative fetters and revert to its origins with one taste of blood (III.m.2), and on the other, like a tyrant who, when stripped of his purple robes, reveals that he is the "enslaver slaved," bound by his chains of lust (IV.m.2). This logic of adornment not only records the economy of power in the material world but also on some level produces it, as Philosophy makes very clear when she describes the way humans control one another through their material goods and bodies: "Quo uero quisquam ius aliquod in quempiam nisi in solum corpus et quod infra corpus est—fortu-
nam loquor—possit exserere? Num quicquam libero imperabis animo? Num mentem firma sibi ratione cohaerentem de statu propriae quietis amouebis?"

[For how can one man exert power over another except upon his body, or upon his fortune, which is less than his body? Can you impose upon a free mind, or deprive a rationally self-possessed mind of its equanimity?].

As this passage illustrates, the subject stripped of his goods and fortune embodies the important distinction between possession and self-possession: freedom is a mind free from the tyranny of the material body and its ornaments. To ensure that the protagonist and reader fully embrace this point, Boethius must tease open the inextricable connection between subjectivity and possession. Thus, whereas Philosophy’s dress provides the initial opportunity for the protagonist to challenge the often-imperceptible role that material objects play in his self-understanding and to confront his own physical dispossession of them, her next step asks that he begin to conceptually separate himself from those objects. It is no coincidence that adornment provides the guiding metaphor for much of the discussions between Philosophy and Boethius regarding Fortune’s material goods, and that, like Philosophy’s dress, it opens up lingering questions about the role of objects in creating and perpetuating misguided notions of subjectivity. Boethius’s nostalgia for his former ornament, while most profound at the beginning of the Consolation, informs the stripping away of misperception throughout the work. The recurring imagery of despoiled purple robes, for example, must be read with the realization that this color was worn not only by emperors, but also by consuls, magistrates, and other public officials at Boethius’s own (former) rank. The inveterate “tyrant” in purple thus transcends Theodoric to figure and refigure Boethius himself—that is, the Boethian self.

The most extended discussion of the pivotal role that ornament plays in self-knowledge and self-possession occurs in the influential passages of Book II.pr.5–m.5, in which Philosophy examines the objects that people desire and for which they strive. The fact that Philosophy very closely repeats this discussion in Book III.pr.2–m.3, when she describes the false goods often mistaken for true Good, marks both structurally and poetically the importance of this discussion; by reduplicating her discussion of the list of desired objects, for example, Philosophy not only draws extra attention to these items but also rhetorically reinscribes the excess of material goods themselves. In Book II.pr.5, clothing is singled out as part of this list of prize possessions including money, gems, beautiful land, and loyal attendants, and it provides the central image for what Philosophy describes as the troubling human need to constantly adorn oneself with such goods:
Itane autem nullum est proprium uobis atque insitum bonum ut in externis ac sepositis rebus bona uestra quaeratis? Sic rerum uersa condicio est ut diuinum merito rationis animal non aliter sibi splendere nisi inanimatae supellectilis possessione uideatur? Et alia quidem suis contenta sunt, uos autem deo mente consimiles ab rebus infimis excellentis naturae ornamenta captatis nec intellegitis quantam conditori uestro faciatis iniuriam.

[Do you try to satisfy your desires with external goods which are foreign to you because you have no good within you which belongs to you? What an upside-down state of affairs when a man who is divine by his gift of reason thinks his excellence depends on the possession of lifeless bric-a-brac! Other creatures are content with what they have; but you, made in the likeness of God by virtue of your reason, choose ornaments for your excellent nature from base things, without understanding how great an injury you do to your Creator.]

Adornment is such a habitual human practice of possession, Philosophy adds, that in taking pleasure in one’s property and landscape an owner effectively imagines that he himself is adorned with fruits and flowers:

An uernis floribus ipse distinguieris aut tua in aestiuos fructus intumescit ubertas? Quid inanibus gaudiis raperis, quid externa bona pro tuis amplexaris? Numquam tua faciet esse fortuna quae a te natura rerum fecit aliena.

[Are you yourself adorned by spring flowers? Are you laden with summer fruit? When you act as though such external goods are your own, you are deluded by foolish satisfaction. Fortune can never make things yours which nature has made foreign to you.]

These passages (and those surrounding them) graft the debate about material goods onto the standard Stoic distinction between that which is natural and that which is artificial, alien, external, and supplementary, a paradigm that was appropriated and perpetuated so effectively by the early Patristic fathers that it remained operative throughout medieval discussions of wealth, clothing, artifice, and self-fashioning. Yet, aside from the fact that Fortune herself is designated as female, Boethius’s formulation seems to shy away from the explicit gendering of ornament that Marcia Colish identifies in other Stoic-influenced writing. Rather than historicizing and feminizing the human impulse to adorn, Boethius’s text situates adornment in relation to the philo-
sophical question behind the notion of possession itself—the question of what constitutes “one’s own.”

Philosophy explicitly uses this notion of ownership to thwart the protagonist’s attachment to the material goods she singles out: jewels (their light is the gem’s, not the individual’s), land (nothing of which has to do with its owner), honest attendants (whose honesty can hardly be counted as another’s possession), and finally, fine clothing (which causes admiration for its material or maker, not its wearer): “Iam uero pulchrum uariis fulgere uestibus putas. Quarum si grata intuitu species est, aut materiae naturam aut ingenium mirabor artifices” [Perhaps you think that beauty means being resplendent in clothing of every variety: but if clothing catches my eye, my admiration will be directed at either the quality of the material or the skill of the tailor]. Boethius’s investigation of the boundaries of “one’s own” carries the residual effect of centuries of philosophical and theological inquiry regarding the ethics of ownership and possession—while at one end of the conversation Plato refused any form of ownership to his ideal rulers, at the other end, Augustine struggled to distinguish what he called “human right,” or the right bestowed by emperors, from “divine right.” By Boethius’s time private property was clearly juxtaposed against the notion of a “natural law” authored and enforced by God. In the words of Justinian,

Sed naturalia quidem jura, quae apud omnes gentes pervaeque observantur, divina quadam providentia constituta, semper firma atque immutabilia permanent. Ea vero, quae ipsa sibi quaeque civitas constituit, saepe mutari solent, vel tacito consensus populi, vel alia postea lege lata.

[The laws of nature, observed by all nations, inasmuch as they are the appointment of a divine providence, remain fixed and immutable. But the laws, which every city has enacted for itself, suffer frequent changes, either by tacit consent of the people, or by some subsequent law.]  

Natural law is unswerving and equal for all; other kinds of law (which Justinian divides into civil and national law) are mutable, contingent, and localized. In the historical discourses around private property, then, we can recognize the foundations of Boethius’s own link between unchanging divine law and Fortune’s law of change. Indeed, the boundaries of private ownership of objects were so variable and elusive to jurists in this period that their explanation, titled “De Rerum Divisione” [Divisions of Things], takes up forty-eight statutes, four times more space than most other subjects, in Justinian’s renowned legal code established a few years after Boethius’s death. Material
objects, and humankind’s relationship to them, were under profound cultural scrutiny when Boethius wrote about the fallacy of Fortune’s goods and the experience of his own material despoilment.

It was the Church fathers who explicitly connected the fraught ethics of ownership with the morality of ornamentation. For, in appropriating the philosophical and juridical discourse around notions of private property and the idea of a natural law corresponding to divine providence, early Christian writers also augmented their reformulation of Stoic ascetic values. Viewing private property as opposed to divine law and as the result of changeful, unnatural sin, they linked it with Adam’s Fall—and hence, with the crucial shift from Edenic nakedness to postlapsarian clothing. These writers, unlike Boethius, were especially concerned with ornament in relation to Eve and womankind. In his De Cultu Feminarum [On the Apparel of Women], for example, Tertullian recasts the standard Stoic statement of antimaterialism, upon which Boethius’s text is also based—“Projiciamus ornamenta terrena, si coelestia optamus” [Let us cast away earthly ornaments if we desire heavenly]—in relation to female fashions and cosmetics. Yet at the heart of these discourses lie the same questions about the inherent problem of private ownership of things; when condemning the use of colored garments, for example, Tertullian states:

Non placet Deo, quod non ipse produxit, nisi si non potuit purpureas et aerinas oves nasci jubere. Si potuit, ergo jam noluit; quod Deus noluit, utique non licet fingi. Non ergo natura optima sunt ista, quae a Deo non sunt, auctore naturae; sic diabolo esse intelliguntur, ab interpolatore naturae. Alterius enim esse non possunt, si Dei non sunt: quia aemuli sint necesse est, quae Dei non sunt; alius autem, praeter diabolum et angelos ejus, aemulus Dei non est.

[That which He Himself has not produced is not pleasing to God, unless He was unable to order sheep to be born with purple and sky-blue fleeces! If He was able, then plainly He was unwilling: what God willed not, of course, ought not to be fashioned. Those things, then, are not the best by nature which are not from God, the Author of nature. Thus they are understood to be from the devil, from the corrupter of nature: for there is no other whose they can be, if they are not God’s; because what are not God’s must necessarily be His rival’s.]74

As this passage reveals, Tertullian inherently associated the fraught question of ownership of material goods with the equally troubled notion of mortal
artifice. To dye garments—one example among the many vices of clothing and ornament he addresses in this text—is not only to claim them as one’s own but to alter them from their natural, divine state, thus refashioning God’s creation. Likewise, to fashion the self with such clothing and ornament, according to Tertullian, is inherently to challenge, through cosmetic change, the unchanging divine law of the divine artificer.

Boethius is more subtle than Tertullian when he investigates the relationship between material possession, self-fashioning, and divine law, yet his choice to make bodily adornment a central conceit of Fortune’s unnatural and excessive material gifts was clearly informed by a similar association. In the Consolatio, as I have discussed, Boethius explicitly links the protagonist’s initial state of alteration to his possession and loss of Fortune’s vestimentary goods; likewise, he situates Fortune’s law of material mutability squarely in comparison to the divine law of immaterial stasis. In helping to actualize the individual’s experience of the changeable material world on the one hand and to map out the larger structure of the path to material transcendence on the other, Boethius’s vestimentary symbolism implicitly draws a link between individual ornamentation and divine design. Angus Fletcher has discussed this kind of conceptual link as the allegorical function of all ornament (he uses the Greek term kosmos) to reflect the positional relationship between the individual object (microcosmos) and the universe within which it exists (macrocosmos).

Ornament, or kosmos, he argues, draws attention not just to the hierarchical status of the object and its wearer within various spheres of order—societal, rhetorical, cosmic—but also to the tensions within and formations of those relationships. In this context the habitus stripped off the protagonist’s back in Boethius’s text always already speaks to his place in and relationship to divine order—that is, to the topic of free will.

It follows, then, that only one kind of possession is natural and unchanging in Boethius’s text, and that is the natural law of self-possession: “Igitur si tui compos fueris, possidebis quod nec tu amittere umquam uel nec fortuna possit auferre” [Then if you possess yourself, you have something you will never want to give up and something which Fortune cannot take from you]. It is of course misfortune—presented in Boethius’s text, as in the morality play with which I opened this chapter, as a twofold stripping, since when she strips her subjects of their goods Boethius’s Fortune also “unmasks” herself (II.pr.8.1)—that offers the freedom of self-possession. As Philosophy says:

Illa fallit, haec instruit; illa mendacium specie bonorum mentes fruentium ligat, haec cognitione fragilis, felicitates absolvit; itaque illam uideas uen-
tosam fluentem suique semper ignaram, hanc sobriam succinctamque et ipsius aduersitatis exercitatione prudentem.

[Good fortune deceives, adverse fortune teaches. Good fortune enslaves the minds of good men with the beauty of the specious goods which they enjoy; but bad fortune frees them by making them see the fragile nature of happiness. You will notice that good fortune is proud, insecure, ignorant of her true nature; but bad fortune is sober, self-possessed, and prudent through the experience of adversity.]^{80}

As the final image of this passage suggests, possession of all kinds, whether of material objects or of self, constitutes a vestimentary order of existence: literally, the so-called good Fortune created by material prosperity is described as *fluentem,* loose and ungirdled, while the so-called bad Fortune constituted by loss is *succinctam,* belted.^{81} In both cases, Fortune—both the goddess and the material goods that she personifies—is the adornment that mediates the subject’s experience and interaction with the world. Understanding Fortune’s habits reveals the underlying tension behind the notion of *bonum* itself: the inextricable connection between the necessity of *having* goods (Boethius’s subject at the beginning of the text) and the necessity of *being* good (his subject at the text’s end).

**CONCLUSION**

Throughout the *Consolatio,* Boethius’s examination of Fortune’s changeable material goods is underscored by the text’s own overtly variable form, the alternation between meter and prose that structures each book. The text’s prosimetric structure ensures that stylistic changeability is ever present in the reader’s mind, forcing the reader to experience and to navigate changeable poetic form at the same time that he or she reads about Fortune’s changeable goods. In a general sense, the *Consolatio*’s poetic aesthetics speaks in different ways to each of the four main discourses of material change I have explored in the sections of this chapter. On the one hand the altered state of the protagonist’s poetry—presented most dramatically by the despairing first meter of Book I—corresponds to the altered sartorial states of both the protagonist and Philosophy at the beginning of the text, both of whom, as I discuss above, teach about the fallacy of Fortune’s goods through their own material despoilment. On the other hand, while the larger vacillating structure of the text most immediately echoes the changeable nature of Fortune’s ever-
turning wheel, it also eventually speaks to the related question of mortal versus divine order. For example, when the text progresses beyond the poetry-laden first book, which begins and ends in meter, the aesthetic vacillations of the form become more regularized, with each section of each subsequent book beginning in prose and ending in meter. As the reader adapts to the regularity of these alternations, the unsettled nature of the fragmented form slowly translates into a seemingly ordered, recognizable design, a process that effectively materializes the opaque relationship between mortal, material chaos and divine providence that Philosophy describes in her conversations with the protagonist.

The end of the Consolatio concludes this aesthetic progression by offering a fleeting moment of stasis in the otherwise vacillating aesthetic structure. By refusing to reshape itself into meter, the final prose section of Book V (V.pr.6) cuts short the structural regularity of the previous three books. The ‘missing’ meter at the end of the Consolatio has been explained convincingly by Seth Lerer’s suggestion that it marks the text’s shift into silent prayer.\(^{82}\) From the perspective of the text’s aesthetic rhythm, this final silence might also be understood as a cessation of the inherent mutability of form, a cessation that mimics the divine stasis that Philosophy describes in this section.\(^{83}\) Structurally, the missing poem, which would ostensibly deal with the characteristics of divine substance, the subject of V.pr.6, corresponds to the ‘extra’ poem at the end of Book I (I.m.7), which portrays the “dark clouds” [Nubibus atris (I.m.7.1)] of worldly concern that blind and chain the protagonist. As I discuss in depth above, this dark matter of worldliness is one of the Consolatio’s dominant metaphors for Fortune’s material goods and the havoc they wreak, and as such it is explicitly connected with both the protagonist’s stripped garment and the dark film covering Philosophy’s garment. It would make structural sense that the extra poem at the end of Book I, on the obscurations effected by worldly goods, would be mirrored by a missing poem at the end of Book V on the true nature of divine substance. In effect, the poem lost shortly after the Consolatio ends is a silent conclusion to the garment and other goods lost shortly before it began.

The instance of literary stasis offered by V.pr.6 is not unprecedented in Boethius’s text. It invokes a similar moment earlier in the Consolatio, in which a single poet holds the power to stop, if momentarily, the never-ending cycle of material possession and loss embodied by Fortune. In Book III, Boethius’s Orpheus, with his sublime singing, causes the perpetual longing and futile consuming of the underworld to momentarily cease. When Orpheus sings, says Philosophy:
non Ixionium caput
uelox praecepitam rota
et longa site perditus
spernit flumina Tantalus;
uultur dum satur est modis
non traxit Tityi iecur.

[Ixion’s head is not tormented by the swift wheel, and Tantalus, long madden-
den by his thirst, ignores the waters he might now drink. The vulture is
filled by the melody and ignores the liver of Tityus.]84

Music, according to Boethius’s De Institutione Musica, is an aesthetic order
that makes manifest the relationship between microcosm and macrocosm;
the musica humana, or the harmony of the human body and soul, corre-
sponds to the musica mundana, the harmony of the spheres.85 This highpoint
in Orpheus’s narrative would thus seem to suggest that the figure of the
musician-poet has been given all the tools necessary to mimic the ordered
harmony of divine design and thus to stop the ever-changing wheel of For-
tune. Yet, as Boethius’s poem further narrates, when it comes to his own
overwhelming desire to see his wife, Orpheus famously succumbs to the
cycle of possession and loss:

Heu, noctis prope terminos
Orpheus Eurydicen suam
uidit, perdit, occidit.
Uos haec fabula respicit
quicumque in superum diem
mentem ducere quaeritis;
nam qui Tartareum in specus
uictus lumina flexerit,
quicquid praecipuum trahit
perdit dum uidet inferos.

[Alas, close to the bounds of night / Orpheus backwards turned his sight
/ And, looking, lost and killed her there. / For you I sing the sad affair, /
Whoever seek the upward way / To lift your mind into the day; / For who
gives in and turns his eye / Back to the darkness from the sky, / Loses while
he looks below / All that up with him may go.]86

Boethius clearly situates Orpheus’s ultimate and archetypal loss of Eurydice
within the greater theme of having and losing in this text; the infernal depths described by the poem correspond to those same dark and worldly attachments that are described elsewhere as causing the protagonist Boethius’s deteriorated state and bowed head. Orpheus epitomizes the never-ending wheel of desiring, having, and losing; his repeated misfortune reminds the reader of the inherent impermanence and conditionality of all of Fortune’s goods. Yet as Boethius presents it, though unfulfilled, Orpheus’s attempt to repossess his object of desire does offer the potential of enlightenment: a glimpse upward toward daylight from the cavernous recesses of hell.

Boethius’s use of Orpheus helps to conclude my discussion of vestimentary change in the Consolatio not only because it nicely highlights the potential of literary aesthetics to reveal and scrutinize material attachment and other practices of material culture, a theme that will recur in my following chapters as well, but also because it plays out in a most direct manner the process of material scrutiny that I have been examining in this text. Like Orpheus, Boethius’s protagonist is required to observe and contemplate the objects of the world, including his own poetic composition, as they change and pass away. These worldly objects are not abundant in the Consolatio, but the experience of their loss encompasses the preliminary action of the text, initiates its philosophical and literary projects, and provides its larger structure and some of its central organizing images. As I have tried to capture in this chapter, Boethius’s use of the garment as a unifying symbol for all worldly goods explores the conceptual terrain of material objects on several levels, speaking, for example, to late antique material culture, to Neoplatonic metaphysics, to intertwined pagan and Christian Stoic ideals, and to the hermeneutic practices of the poet-philosopher who must transcend material concerns to seek immaterial truth. While scholars disagree about whether Boethius’s protagonist ever in fact reaches the material transcendence he seeks by the end of the Consolatio, the beginning of the text offers an indisputably simple path for readers to follow: when experiencing the downfall of Fortune’s wheel—that is, the change in one’s material circumstances that will inevitably occur—examine very closely one’s attachment to the material objects that facilitate that change and to the self-perpetuating habits of practice that they generate. This lesson begins with a reexamination of the garment that each person wears on his or her body each day.

The practical simplicity of this message becomes very important to later writers. In the next chapter I will trace the development of Boethius’s vestimentary discourses through the clothed figure of Fortune in select high- and late-medieval texts, exploring the ways that later writers took up and reworked the trope of changing clothing in the context of their own cultures.
The pervasiveness of Boethius’s text, images, and ideas in the high and late Middle Ages meant that the *Consolatio* had a profound influence not only on the cultural understanding of material change and changeability but also on the notion of clothing as a symbol of change. As I will discuss, in the same way that Boethius transformed the classical image of the goddess Fortune as pageant master and clothier into a meditation on the habitual cycles of material possession and loss, so several later writers transformed the Boethian Fortune into a figure for the habitual cycles of consumer behavior that they in turn witnessed in their own lives. In this later tradition Boethius is repositioned as an expert on the care of the self, his dialectic of free will and divine design are made to underlie the emerging discourses of self-fashioning, and his notion of Fortune’s ever-changing garments becomes merged with a relative newcomer in the conceptual world of vacillating goods, the notion of “fashion.”