TWO

Fashioning Change

WEARING FORTUNE’S GARMENTS IN HIGH- AND LATE-MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

Was thanne myn habit swiche as it is now?
—Chaucer, Boece

The vestimentary habits of thought and practice outlined in Boethius’s Consolatio provided writers throughout medieval Europe with a theoretical structure through which to explore the pleasures and dangers of materialism. As I discussed in chapter 1, while Boethius was interested in examining the allure of material objects in general and clothing in particular, he stayed away from describing the details of contemporary garments in his culture, preferring instead to use clothing as a unifying trope for the universal human experience of Fortune’s changeable material goods. I will explore in this chapter the ways that later medieval writers followed Boethius’s focus on clothing as Fortune’s particular object of influence, and also how they shifted the emphasis of the discussion to precisely the terms that Boethius seems to have avoided: contemporary fashions. As I will demonstrate, clothing and ornament became the primary medium of change for the dominant cultural agent of change—Fortune—at precisely the moment when, clothing historians have recently argued, the phenomenon called “fashion,” devoted explicitly to the notion of restless change, began to materialize as a cultural system.

My analysis will primarily concentrate on the development of Fortune’s own changeable ornament—the clothing that adorns her body, rather than the subjects on her wheel—as an emerging trope in vernacular poetry written in high-medieval France and late-medieval England. To give a larger con-
text for this development, however, I will first speak to an important trend in the popular reception of Boethius’s text during this period. As scholars have pointed out, high- and late-medieval writers commonly emphasized and augmented the *Consolatio*’s practical potential; the themes and tropes from the first two books of the *Consolatio* so dominated its popular reception, for example, that vernacular translations and adaptations of the text often left off the later books partially or altogether, concentrating only on the effective methods of understanding and rejecting the allure of material goods. Both Jean de Meun and Chaucer, who translated the *Consolatio* in its entirety and clearly knew the work intimately, also draw largely from Boethius’s first two books when they allude to Fortune in their work. Fourteenth-century England in particular saw an increased interest overall in the secular accessibility of Boethius’s text through the commentaries of what Beryl Smalley termed the “classicising” friars, who augmented Boethius’s ideas to include more literal, historical, and universal knowledge. Within this context, while Fortune’s ultimate Boethian identity as an intermediary of divine will and order certainly endured in this period, it was outperformed by her popularity as a conceit for the human experience of material prosperity, mutability, and disorder.

One of the most widespread examples of this shift in perception can be found in medieval illuminators’ and artists’ explorations of the ‘stripped men grasping Fortune’s wheel’ motif that saturated high- and late-medieval European culture. Like the dramatic performance of this trope in the morality play *Bien Advisé et Mal Advisé* that I discuss in my previous chapter, the corresponding visual iconography relied on Boethius’s interrelated cycles of having-and-losing and dressing-and-stripping to depict the phenomenology of material change and changeability. While the symbolic meaning of these images inevitably varied according to context—the figures on Fortune’s wheel portray a variety of specifics regarding sociopolitical status, material and economic circumstance, and physical degeneration or mutation—the vestimentary scheme is almost always present, and sometimes in extreme forms (see figures 2.1 and 2.2 and plate 1).

In a way that complements the literary examples that I will explore in this chapter, these iconic images of men in states of sartorial transformation demonstrate the paradoxical potential of material objects outlined by Boethius’s *Consolatio*. Like the material goods discussed in that text, the objects that encode social and economic capital are revealed in images of Fortune’s revolving wheel to be simultaneous purveyors of inevitable misfortune and of the revelation that such misfortune brings; in their ability to represent both the lived experience of immediate material change (literal acquisition and loss)
Figure 2.1 Changing states of dress take prominence in Fortune’s iconography, as can be seen in this illumination from the *Bible Moralisée* dated to the first half of the thirteenth century. © BnF, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Latin 11560, fol. 129v.
Fourteenth-century artists continued to depict Fortune’s victims in changing states of dress, as seen in this manuscript of the *Roman de la Rose* (c. 1350). © BnF. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Fr. 1567, fol. 135v.
and the larger systemic structure of that change (the cycles of acquisition and loss repeated throughout personal and human history), the pictorial representations of Fortune’s wheel express both the destructive cycles of material possession and the knowledge derived by examining those cycles. To push this analysis a little further, one could say that in its focus on circular movement and symbolic material objects, this iconography actualizes the trope of Fortune’s turning wheel as an exploration of *troping* itself—as a turning (Gk. *trópos*, turn), of one thing into another.

Scholars have studied the growing pervasiveness of Fortune’s iconography in high- and late-medieval culture without addressing a parallel development in the aesthetic logic of fashionable clothing in material culture. With its sartorial representation of systemic capriciousness, mutability of form, and social mobility, Fortune’s wheel is the quintessential symbol for the mechanism of medieval fashion. This association manifests broadly in the way complaints about new fashions exemplified the same general characteristics as Fortune: that of erratic, status-oriented changeability depicted by diverse and fluctuating shapes, colors, and styles. In more specific terms, the dialectics of late-medieval fashion itself, entrenched in a discourse about vacillations between old and new shapes, long and short garments, and excessive ornamentation or scantiness, seem inherently keyed to Fortune’s paradigm of excess and dearth. The suggestion is made more explicit when the figures on Fortune’s wheel appear to play out the cycle of fashion as well as the cycle of Fortune’s favors, as in one illumination in an early-fifteenth-century French translation of *Consolatio* (see plate 1).

The image in plate 1 portrays a version of the standard iconography of Fortune’s wheel: the king at the top (Regno) wears a crown and holds a scepter, the destitute man at the bottom (Sum sine regno) has been stripped of all goods, and the two men in between (Regnabo and Regnavi) either rise toward or fall away from those opposed positions of power, rank, and prosperity. Yet in using standards of vestimentary style to depict Fortune’s victims, this illuminator also constructs a story about the phenomenon of fashion. When at the top of the wheel, the man is clearly inscribed as a fashionable “galaunt,” a late-medieval social type I will discuss in depth in chapter 5. He wears the stereotypical garments of the fourteenth-century fashion revolution: a tight, short jacket with multicolored patterns on the fabric and wide, pointed pendant sleeves, a low hip belt, tight parti-colored red and green hose on his legs, and extremely long straight pikes (pointed shoes). His garments are considerably more extreme in shape, style, and material than those of the man climbing the wheel on the right (Regnabo), who, despite parti-colored hose and an ornamental dagger on his belt that matches the point of his
pikes, wears a jacket with more reserved fabrics and decorative accents. On the opposite side, the man (Regnavi) wears even fewer fashionable items: his moderately stylish hat with an upturned brim and pleated—though simple and not dyed—shirt suggest that he is not a peasant but a courtier who has been recently stripped of his outer garment. The varying hairstyles of these men also appear to correspond according to the nuances of fashion: while the naked man at the bottom of the wheel has a cropped or bald head, the man falling has slightly longer hair under his cap, the man rising appears to have even longer curled hair under a green ornamental fillet, and the king has coiffed hair under his crown and a double-pointed beard.

These elements not only use as their main currency the experience of changeable fashions, they also create an implicit comparison between the mannered style of the men on the wheel and that of the fifteenth-century readers who would have examined this illumination as they read this copy of Boethius’s text. Importantly, the fashions caricatured here are a bit old fashioned themselves, in that they correspond more clearly to the styles of the late fourteenth century than to those of the early-fifteenth-century culture to which the manuscript belongs, and in this context the readers of the manuscript would have further reason to contemplate the phenomenon of changing fashions: their own understanding of fashionable attire had already displaced much of what they saw represented on the page. Illuminations such as this one remind us of the material hermeneutic that Boethius’s text offered late-medieval readers: an opportunity to think about worldly changeability in relation to their own specific use of material goods, to their own changing aesthetics, and to the corresponding changes they witnessed around themselves.

Another significant demonstration of Boethius’s influence on high- and late-medieval ideas about material culture in general and clothing culture in particular can be found in a text that was wrongly ascribed to him at the time, *De disciplina scholarium* [On the Training of Scholars]. An introduction to the conditions, the discipline, and the coursework required for successful study by scholars from age seven to teachers holding a university degree, this Latin pedagogical text also offers an often-humorous vision of the scholar’s struggle to maintain constancy in a world full of material distractions, a list that includes self-ornamentation along with hot weather, excessive food and drink, marriage, the mercantile profession, and the poverty of the adult master besieged by creditors. Written in the first part of the thirteenth century (c. 1230–40), *De disciplina* was an extremely popular text during the high- and late-medieval periods, existing in over 130 manuscripts and over thirty commentaries, paired in manuscripts with the incomparably ubiquitous *Conso-
latio, and ranked in importance with work by saints Jerome, Augustine, and Bernard. It enjoyed special relevance in England, where the Dominican friar Nicholas Trevet cited it in his widely circulated commentary on the *Consolatio* (c. 1300), where the Oxford grammarian William Wheatley (who also wrote a commentary on the *Consolatio*) wrote a commentary on it (c. 1309), and where the true author of the text might have lived. Part of the attraction of this text was undoubtedly its role as a kind of companion to the *Consolatio*: whereas the *Consolatio* deals with the last years of Boethius’s life, *De disciplina* creates a fiction about Boethius’s early years as a student in Athens. Likewise, whereas the *Consolatio* instructs the philosopher to abandon material goods in a general sense, *De disciplina* provides myriad details and anecdotes about the mundane material problems that plague the scholar and teacher who might attempt to do just that.

*De disciplina* provides a fascinating, largely untapped portrayal of the way that themes from the *Consolatio* were perceived, misperceived, and reworked by writers in high- and late-medieval culture, and especially the manner in which Boethius’s name became tied to contemporary ideas about the care of the self. To name a prime example, Trevet’s use of the text in his widespread commentary on the *Consolatio* suggests the extent to which *De disciplina* influenced contemporary perceptions about one of the most influential of all of Boethius’s poems in the high- and late-medieval period, II.m.5 on the blissful “former age.” The first three lines of Boethius’s original meter target the vice of *luxuria*—literally, “extravagance” or “excess”—as the sole destroyer of that first age: “Felix nimium prior aetas / contenta fidelibus aruis / nec inerti perdita luxu” [O happy was that long lost age / Content with nature’s faithful fruits / And not ruined by slothful luxury]. When discussing line 3 in his commentary, Trevet cites *De disciplina* by name in order to elaborate on the key term *luxuria*, pointing readers to that text’s threelfold definition of the concept:

Nec perdita luxu inerti id est non erat dedita luxurie et bene dicit luxu inerti quia inercia et oium ut multum sunt causa luxurie! . . . Est autem luxus triplex ut docet Boecius de disciplina scolarium: quedam in coitu; quedam in cibo et potu; quedam in uestitu. Quomodo autem quolibet istorum homo ad perdicionem inducitur satis docet ibidem.

[and was not ruined by slothful luxury (3), that is, was not a slave to luxury, and he aptly calls luxury slothful, for how much are idleness and slothfulness the causes of luxury! . . . There are three sorts of luxury, as Boethius teaches in his work *On the Training of Scholars*: luxury in sexual
matters, luxury in matters of food and drink, luxury in the choice of clothing. He clearly shows us in the same work how a man is led to ruin by any one of these forms of luxury.]^{12}

With respect to its role as one of the seven deadly sins, the term *luxuria* had come by the fourteenth century to mean almost exclusively the first vice listed: sexual indulgence or “lechery.”^{13} Yet this passage insists on the word’s broader meaning: *luxuria* as the antithesis of frugality as well as chastity, a form of extravagance that inherently connects lechery and gluttony to luxury goods.^{14} Contemporary poets demonstrate a similar impulse: in their reworkings of II.m.5, both Jean de Meun in the thirteenth century and Chaucer in the fourteenth century emphasize the literal sense of Boethius’s wording, using the cultural keyword “outrage,” or excess, to translate *luxuria* in both French and Middle English, and thereby keeping the focus on the excessive use of material goods that Boethius singles out in his original text.^{15}

The passages in question from *De disciplina* offer numerous specific examples of the threefold extravagance explicated by the Pseudo-Boethius author. In discussing the vice of excessive clothing, the author includes a long list of debasing habits of personal adornment that starts with variety of clothing and then indulges in many other titillating details of cosmetic self-maintenance. The personification of ornament in this passage strikes a moralizing posture closer to Prudentius’s *Psychomachia* than to Boethius’s restrained *Consolatio*:

*Haec autem vestium gaudet varietate frequentiae, earumque in sigillatone membratim, pectinis beneficio caesariem polire, et calamistri tortuositate, flororumque diversitate seriatim lascivere [sic], gulumque suam fuco perfundere, novaculaeque frequenti castigationi inhiare, sinum aromatibus adimplere, gemmatis colla monilibus, Parthorumque cingulis ventrem castigatum plebi ostendere, rostratis tabulatisque calceis ut regina incedere, colloque elato, gutture inflato, supercilio mutilato, oculo impudico, fastuosoque incessu semicirculariter incedere gaudet.*

[Furthermore [the vice of ornament] rejoices in the variety of a large supply of clothes, and in the little figures which adorn these clothes on every limb, and in making the hair shiny with the help of a comb, in taking unseemly delight in tight curling irons and a display of various flowers, in forcing fancy foods down the throat, admiring frequent smoothings of the skin with a razor, filling the bosom with perfumes and the neck with bejewelled necklaces, revealing to the common people a stomach held flat by Parthian girdles, and rejoicing in walking about like a queen with pointed and high-
soled shoes, with neck held aloft, throat puffed up, eyebrows plucked, with a shameless eye and a haughty extravagant (or semi-circular) gait.]^{16}

This text locates its aesthetic more overtly in late-antique, rather than high-medieval, practices of adornment, offering details about shaved skin and “Parthian” girdles to help perpetrate the illusion of Boethius’s authorship. The focus remains, however, on the culture of transformative excess provided by ornament: with each additional turn of a phrase, yet another layer is added in the process of fashioning the self. In one particularly evocative moment, self-shaping evolves into a mesmerizing rhythm of shape-shifting: “colloque elato, gutture inflato, supercilio mutilato.” Later in the passage the figure undergoes a Boethian change of fortune, tumbling from the heights of excess and haughtiness to the depths of poverty and dearth: “Quid plura dicam, ad tantam licet invitus devenit inopiam, quod ea quae prius fastidiendo contempsit, mendicans corrogando composuerit, fortunae meatu permutato” [To cut a long story short, this vice falls victim to such great poverty, however reluctant it may be, that it becomes satisfied with begging for what it previously arrogantly despised, once the path of fortune has changed].^{17} I discussed in the previous chapter the ways in which Boethius’s *Consolatio* touches upon the notion of self-fashioning in its scrutiny of the role that dress and ornament play in cultural use and habits of material possession; here, Boethius is made into an irrefutable authority on the subject.

Finally, in its emphasis on the notion of *varietas vestium*, variety of clothes, this passage from *De disciplina* would have particularly resonated with late-medieval English readers and writers, since, as I discussed in my introduction, the concept had become by the fourteenth century a recognizable feature of nationalistic self-description among English writers. In fact Boethius specifically mentions variety in clothes in II.pr.5 of the *Consolatio* (the prose section that anticipates the more famous poem II.m.5) when he describes clothing as one of the false goods of Fortune: “Iam uero pulchrum uariis fulgere uestibus putas” [Perhaps you think that beauty means being resplendent in clothing of every variety.]^{18} It is quite possible that this passage inspired the corresponding passage about *varietas vestium* in *De disciplina*; it would doubtless have been part of Trevet’s understanding as he connected the passage with II.m.5 in his commentary on the *Consolatio*. Considering the pervasiveness among English scholastic circles of both the *Consolatio* and *De disciplina*, often in the same manuscript, and the possibility that *De disciplina* was written by an English author, it is conceivable that either or both of these textual references influenced the later perception of English *varietas vestium* by Ranulph Higden that is discussed by Andrew Galloway. This would place
Boethius at the center of medieval English clerical discourses about dress and changeability, a discourse, as Galloway makes clear, that had a great influence on secular as well as learned discussions about the fashioning and self-fashioning of a national English aesthetic. Regardless of whether Boethian texts were a literary source for discussions of *varietas vestium*, however, it is clear that during the high- and late-medieval period when the Boethian authorship of *De disciplina* was accepted as authentic, Boethius was understood to have a profound influence on material matters, not only because of his philosophical work on transcending material goods in the *Consolatio*, but also because of his attributed work in *De disciplina* on the kinds of practical “discipline” needed to avoid specific luxury goods and the vices of excess, variety, and changeability that they were thought to engender.

**FORTUNE’S FRENCH MODE: SELF-FASHIONING IN THE THIRTEENTH CENTURY**

The high- and late-medieval inclination to connect Boethian literary tropes to cultural practices involving luxury goods can be seen in the historical development of Fortune herself as a figure of and for fashion in this period, a tropological evolution that will be my primary focus for the remainder of this chapter. As I discussed in the previous chapter, in his *Consolatio* Boethius explicitly presents Fortune’s powers in vestimentary terms, but, in contrast to his elaborate description of her foil Philosophy, he refuses to describe Fortune’s personified figure in such material terms. By comparison, later writers typically accentuate the corporeal figuration of Fortune’s transitory ways, often using as her primary characteristic the changeable attire she wears on her body. To follow the development of this imagery is to chart the trajectory of medieval ideas about clothing and ornament as mediators of and figures for cultural change; inversely, it is also to chart the process by which the goddess of worldly changeability becomes a conceit for the emerging related phenomena of fashion, conspicuous consumption, and self-fashioning. As I will illustrate, the more *stylistic* change begins to stand in for changes in circumstance within Fortune’s iconography—for example, as the symbolic clout of Fortune’s ever-changing fashions begins to challenge and even surpass that of her spinning wheel in literary representations—the more attainable Fortune’s favors seem to become as forms of symbolic capital that can be purchased, imitated, and appropriated. Ironically, through its growing association with contemporary material practices involving novel fashions, a trope that begins as a symbol of the lack of control mortals have over their own material
circumstances becomes by the end of the medieval period a potential symbol for the power wielded by the self-fashioning subject.\(^{10}\)

One of the few critical attempts to historicize medieval Fortune's changing iconography underscores the importance of the twelfth century's commercial and economic changes to her development. Alexander Murray posits that the emergence of the wheel in twelfth-century visual representations of the goddess may reflect the explosive new money-based economy of this period as well as the social instability that came with it: “the growing prevalence and vigour, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, of up-and-down social movement.”\(^{21}\) Equally, and in many respects more profoundly influenced by that period's increased focus on money, commerce, and social mobility, however, is Fortune's sartorial representation. Sarah-Grace Heller has delineated the fundamental criteria that helped a nascent fashion system emerge alongside the commercial developments of twelfth- and thirteenth-century France, revealing how individual elements such as discourses of spending and shopping, unique sewing and styles, and an escalating fashion lexicon worked together to help sustain an emerging ideology dependent on “the desire for distinction, uniqueness and admiration.”\(^{22}\) A glance at Heller's list of criteria makes evident why Fortune was such an important figure for writers exploring the emerging ideology of fashion, as the principle of change and/or changeability dominates the list, from criterion number one, fashion’s “disqualification of the past”; to criterion number two, “society-wide desire for constant, systematic change”; to criterion five, “change occurs in superficial forms rather than in major ones”; to criterion eight, criticism about criteria numbers one and two.\(^{23}\) According to Heller, and previously according to Gilles Lipovetsky, although he situates his discussion later in the medieval period, a crucial aspect of the changes that make up the fashion system is their convergence in “an esthetic cult of the self”: a growing interest and investment in distinctive consumer practices and unique individual sartorial choices.\(^{24}\) Fortune's literary iconography in this period seems to reflect these cultural changes in a specific way, which is to present Fortune as enacting upon her own body the type of spectacular sartorial oscillation that she so famously unleashes on her victims.

Alain de Lille offers a brief but prototypical example of this reconceptualization of Fortune as a figure of self-fashioning. Within his longer description of Fortune's personified appearance in his *Anticlaudianus* (c. 1170), Alain describes her as a Boethian figure in a Roman toga, lamenting her change of circumstances: “Nunc meliore toga splendet, nunc paupere cultu [p]lebescens Fortuna jacet, nunc orphana veste [p]rostat, et antiquos lugere videtur honores” [Now she shines forth in finer toga, now slumming, she wallows in the
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clothes of the poor; now left without a dress to her name, she offers herself to the public and is seen bemoaning her honours of old]. This epigrammatic description of Fortune's dress stages several important elements of Fortune's material changeability: the speed of her alterations underscored by the temporal dislocation of the “nunc . . . nunc” phrasing; her mutability presented as a dialectic between ornament and nakedness; and her performance of spectacle as an object of the public gaze. Fortune’s sartorial descent is imagined not only in terms of prostitution, a familiar overtone for personified figures that we have seen used by Macrobius, but also, and more uniquely, as a type of “orphaned” existence of deprivation and abandonment. In the narrative of the Anticlaudianus Fortune is the last personification to give gifts to the New Man, her gifts being the finishing touches above and beyond the foundational gifts of the virtues and seven liberal arts, and when she astonishes the court of Nature by arriving to bestow this final contribution, her changeable sartorial aesthetic seems to have developed more properly into a style rather than an idiosyncrasy: for the first time, her “habitus mutatio” [change of dress] and “vultus [d]egener” [déclassé look] aestheticize change rather than enacting it.

This impulse is taken up later by Jean de Meun, who greatly expands Alain's image of Fortune's stylized sartorial bipolarity in his section of the Roman de la Rose (c. 1269–78). Reason's protracted description of Fortune borrows imagery and language from Alain, such as the unique expression “sartorial orphan,” but its tone and focus on excess are similar to that of the Pseudo-Boethius De disciplina written earlier in the same century. The oft-cited passage revels in its own languorous amplification of Fortune’s changing aesthetic:

quant el veut estre honoree, / si se tret en la part doree / de sa meson, et la sejorne: / lors pare son cors et atorne, / et se vest, comme une reïne, / de grant robe qui li treïne, / de toute diverses ouleurs, / de mout desguiseses couleurs / qui sunt es saies et es laines / selonc les herbes et les graines / et selonc autre choses maintes / don les draperies sunt taintes / don toutes riches genz se vestent / qui por honores avoir s'aprestent. / Ainsinc Fortune se desguise, / mes bien te di qu'ele ne prise / tretouz cels du monde un festu / quant voit son cors ainsinc vestu, / ainz est tant orgueilleuse et fiere / quil n'est orguieuz qui s'i afierre . . . Puis va tant roant par sa sale / qu'el entre en la partie sale, / foible, decrevee et crolant, / o toute sa roe volant. / Lors va çoupant et jus se boute / ausinc con s'el n'i veïst goute; / et quant iluec se voit cheuë, / sa chiere et son habit remue, / et si se desnue et desrobe / qu'el est orfeline de robe / et semble qu'el n'ait riens vaillant, / tant li vont
When she wants to be honoured, she betakes herself to the golden part of her house and remains there, adorning and beautifying her body, dressing herself like a queen, in a long robe that trails behind her and is variously scented and brightly coloured, as silks and woolens can be, depending on the plants and seeds and many other things used to dye the clothes worn by all rich people who are preparing to receive honours. So Fortune disguises herself, but I tell you truly when she sees her person attired in this way, she gives not a straw for anyone in the world but is so proud and haughty that there is no pride to be compared with hers . . . Then, with her wheel all flying, she goes turning through the house until she comes to the part that is dirty and ramshackle, cracked and tottering. Then she stumbles and falls to the ground as if completely blind, and, seeing herself fallen there, she changes her appearance and her dress, denuding and stripping herself to such an extent that she is bereft of clothes, so lacking in goods that she seems to have nothing of worth. When she sees this misfortune, she looks for a shameful way out, and betakes herself to a brothel, where she lies, sighing and lamenting. There she sheds floods of tears over the great honours that she has lost and the delights she enjoyed when she used to wear fine clothes.

In this portrait of Fortune's melodramatic attire and circumstances we are made to witness fashion's performative capabilities, the "theatrical logic of excess and exaggeration" that helps establish the thirteenth-century fashion system and that makes up Heller's criterion number six. But we also glimpse a more private medieval experience regarding Fortune's goods, a psychological process of self-study that is explicitly linked to the practice of fashioning the self with material goods. Both the wealthy, scented, adorned Fortune and the stripped, prostituted, abject Fortune in this passage rely on the power of the self-gaze—what Lipovetsky calls fashion's "aesthetic self-observation" and what Michael Camille calls the courtly woman's process of "self-specularization"—to calculate her sartorially appropriate status. When she sees the riches that adorn her ["quant el voit ses granz richeces" (6109)], she is haughty and prideful; similarly, when she sees her fallen and misfortunate states ["quant iluec se voit cheüe" (6121); "quant el voit la meschaance" (6423)], she embraces the attire and status of the forsaken.
This passage implies that processes of aesthetic self-observation are inherently linked to social imitation; Fortune dresses herself like a queen, and her variety of scents and colors is representative of how all rich people dress themselves. This portrait of a pluralized, imitative, mutable aesthetic practice is underscored by Jean's reduplication of similar images and sounds, such as in the lines “de toute diverses ouleurs, / de mout desguisees couleurs” (6095–96), and in the simultaneous threefold stripping away that we are asked to envision: “et si se desnue et desrobe / qu’el est orfeline de robe” (6123–24). A central conceit in this passage is “disguise”: Fortune is said to disguise not only the colors of her dress but also her very self: “[a]insinc Fortune se desguise” (6103). The primary meaning of this word in medieval French and English differed from our leading sense today, which rests in the deception and concealment of identity. In the medieval period the word carried a more literal sense of des-guiser: an ‘offing’ of a particular style or a change from one’s usual appearance; as a term for changing one’s style it became a keyword in discourses about fashion in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century France and England. Ironically, in changing her attire to more adequately reflect her circumstances, as she does when she sees herself fallen in the decrepit part of her house and subsequently strips herself of clothing, on some level Fortune appears to be following the aesthetic logic of decorum privileged in high-medieval culture: that is, in overtly trying to match her form to her circumstance, she could be seen as trying to avoid the appearance of vestimentary deception. Read in this light, Jean's Fortune might be seen as a parody not only of the numerous variety of clothes worn by the very rich, whom she overtly imitates, but also of the cultural standard by which any significant change of financial status would necessitate a public upgrading or downgrading of sumptuary variety. As Heller has pointed out, a French sumptuary law that was enacted in 1279, the year after Jean finished his completion of the Roman de la Rose, focuses its attention on exactly this issue, regulating dress according to “how many changes of clothes per year persons of each rank were allowed.”

While Jean de Meun's description of Fortune clearly comments in a variety of ways on the general phenomenon of vestimentary changeability in his culture, by describing the ways that Fortune adorns herself, admires herself, undresses herself, and disparages herself behind closed doors, it also humanizes and individualizes the goddess. As E. Jane Burns puts it, “[i]t is an elaborately dressed lady named Fortune” that we are made to see here. If we compare the above passage with a later passage in the same text, we can see how Fortune's spectacle of dressing and undressing works as a precursor for other types of sartorial stripping and redressing based more overtly in the
minutiae of contemporary stylistic distinction. Pygmalion's obsessive refashioning of his sculpture/lady near the end of the *Roman de la Rose* seems to replicate in a more microscopic scale Fortune's earlier impulses, distinguishing different sartorial “guises” according to price, color, region, and even religion:

Puis li revest en maintes guises / robes fetes par granz mestrises / de blans dras de soëve laine, / d'escallate, de tiretaine, / de vert, de pers et de brunette, / de couleur fresche, fine et nete, / ou mout a riches panes mises, / erminees, veres et grises. / Puis les li roste, et puis ressaie / con li siet bien robe de saie, / cendauz, melequins, hatebis, / indes, vermeuz, jaunes e bis, / samiz, diapres, kameloz. . . . Autre foiz li met une guimple, / et par desus un quevrechief / qui queuvre la guimple et le chief; / mes ne queuvre pas le visage, / qu'il ne veust pas tenir l'usage / des Sarradins.

[He would dress her in different ways, in robes fashioned with great skill from soft white wool, from scarlet cloth or linsey woolsey, from cloth of green or blue, or rich dark stuff, in colours that were fresh and fine and bright, richly furred with ermine, miniver, and squirrel. Then he would take them off again, to see how well she looked in a robe of silk, sendal, tabby, or other precious stuffs, in indigo, vermilion, yellow, or brown, in samite, diapered fabric, or camlet . . . Sometimes he would attire her in a wimple, with a kerchief to cover the wimple and the head, but not the face, for he had no wish to imitate the habit of the Saracens.]^{32}

The description of the statue's changes of clothing continues in this vein for approximately a hundred lines, adding both more outfits and more exquisite details, such as the number of stones Pygmalion picks from the seashore to place in the precious purse which he hangs from her expensive girdle, why he chooses not to dress her feet in Parisian boots, and how snugly he sews her sleeves with golden thread. Like Fortune's earlier dressing scene, which humanizes her, the clothing changes here bring the statue one step closer to life; in fact, it is directly following this scene that Pygmalion finally prays to Venus to make his artwork into a real woman, and is obliged. In a stunning inversion of the process of reification, here we see a process in which consumer goods and changes of fashion actually help to convert an object into a living human being.^{33}

Together these two passages situate the cultural discourse of thirteenth-century fashion and consumption in relation to the question of the gendered, objectifying gaze—the male gaze versus the female self-gaze—and, beneath
the question of visual allure, to the question of gendered legal ownership and usage of material goods. This subject gets taken up more directly in Chaucer’s version of Fortune, as I will discuss in the next section, and in a different way in the power struggles displayed in Griselda’s clothing that I will discuss in chapter 4. Yet in Jean’s early portrayal of Fortune’s process of self-fashioning we can begin to see Fortune’s instructive value as a figure for individual consumer behavior and consumer power. Ultimately, what Jean offers us is a lady whose self-fashioning manifests a form of free will: a woman who follows her own material whims according to what and when she wants—quant el veut, as the excerpt begins. If the figure of Fortune herself, rather than her control over others, seems an unlikely model for exploring the question of human free will, we need only be reminded that one of her foundational characteristics has always been her ability to do exactly as she likes without any responsibility to the rules of human order and justice. As her representation becomes more humanized and particularized in its own relation to material goods, she begins to present a recognizable form of material self-determination that corresponds more directly to medieval regulatory efforts regarding the consumption of material goods.

REGULATING FORTUNE’S MANERE
IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

Moving to fourteenth-century England and to a writer deeply influenced by both Alain de Lille and Jean de Meun, we see Chaucer take up these themes directly by writing a poem that challenges Fortune’s material excesses and mutability in a court of law. His short Boethian poem known as “Fortune” situates the personified goddess as the defendant against which a “pleintif” makes a series of legal complaints regarding the disorder and “transmutacioun” (1) of the world governed by Fortune’s “errour” (4) and experienced through her variable goods: through “wele or wo, now povre and now honour” (2). In this poem we see a protagonist who takes up the practical mantle of De disciplina scholarium, using his “resoun” (9) and moderation to resist Fortune’s cycle of plenty and dearth: “My suffisaunce shal be my socour,” he says, “For fynally Fortune, I thee defye” (15–16).

The judicial setting of the poem allows Chaucer to update the twofold nature of the consolatory genre, in which the complainant’s own statements are often used to undermine his grievances. Thus even as he lists her crimes, Chaucer’s plaintiff himself inadvertently reveals some of the benefits of Fortune’s vacillations, the primary one being the way he can distinguish Fortune’s
friends from his own by their “negardye in keping hir richesse” (53). As this verse suggests, whereas Chaucer’s poem certainly makes a gesture of reaching to philosophical heights—by having the plaintiff invoke Socrates’ wisdom and antматerialism to strengthen his own, for example—it also clearly ushers the notion of Fortune’s power over worldly goods into a more materially inclined fourteenth-century context. It is by now commonplace to say that the period in which Chaucer wrote was a time of intense development and reassessment of trade, industry, and credit economy—the culmination of a veritable “commercial revolution” whose social and ideological frictions are played out in the texts of the late fourteenth century.

Fortune’s problematical symbolic function in this material context is demonstrated by her mixed purpose in this poem: while the plaintiff presents a case for restricting Fortune’s excesses, using her bad governance as a metaphor for excessive royal expenditure, and while the plaintiff also claims to want to “deye” Fortune by gaining “maystrye” (14) over himself, the poem also demonstrates the more specific material agenda of a begging poem, first in its repeated focus on the material generosity of one true but unnamed Boethian “frend” (50), and then more directly in its envoy, in which Fortune herself turns around to beg for sovereign gifts for the plaintiff-speaker.

In Chaucer’s “Fortune” the goddess is presented first and foremost as an allegorized queen, but as in Jean de Meun’s poem, she is also a human figure caught up in contemporary vices such as profligacy and extravagance. Her decadent compulsions and those of her followers implicitly form the context of her trial, which depicts her plaintiff-subject as desperate to regulate her: “Woltow than make a statut on thy quene / That I shal been ay at thyn ordinaunce?” (43–44), Fortune quips to her accuser. Some time ago Aage Brusendorff proposed that the regulatory frame of this poem should be specifically read in response to the 1390 Ordinance of the Privy Council of Richard II, which attempted to drastically regulate royal gifts. While the specifics of this thesis have been called into question, Brusendorff’s general reading of the poem as a comment on contemporary debates about royal consumption has obvious merit. Chaucer provides a clear connection between Fortune’s wealth and royal wealth, so that the Boethian notion regarding Fortune’s ownership of all goods corresponds in Chaucer’s poem to the feudal system in which the sovereign ruler, likewise, is commonly understood to be the godlike owner of all property. In truth, Fortune says at the end of the poem, God is the one with true property, heaven’s “propretee of sikernes” (69), whereas her own “intresse” (71)—“interest,” both situational and financial—lasts only as long as the plaintiff’s last day in the world. Whereas Boethius strove to situate Fortune’s instability within the system of divine
providence and order, however, Chaucer’s attempt to bring Fortune’s material vacillations to justice means that he must actively distinguish her goods from divine goods. He thus claims that while Fortune is often mistaken for divine “majestee” (65), this misperception is initiated by “blinde bestes ful of lewednesse” (68). It follows that Chaucer would confine the classic Boethian phrase about Fortune’s power over material goods with a further reference to her royalty; his Fortune states: “Thou pinchest at my mutabilitee / For I thee lente a drope of my richesse, / And now me lyketh to withdrawe me” (57–59), to which Chaucer adds the line “Why sholdestow my realtee oppresse?”—[why should you oppress my royalty?] (60). Supplementing this apparent commentary on the contemporary battle for control over royal riches is the envoy of the poem, which is addressed to “princes” and which recasts the unfortunate plaintiff of the poem as a complainant in need of sovereign gifts.

If Chaucer’s subtext in his only poem entirely devoted to Fortune implies its interest in notions of both judicial and extrajudicial control over goods in the feudal system, its overtly purported topic ties these elements once again to the theme of Fortune’s ornamental powers: the frequent title of the poem in manuscript form is not the modern title “Fortune,” but “Balades de Visage sanz Peinture,” or “Ballads on a face without painting.” Ornament, the Consolatio teaches us, conceptually speaks to the paradox of material freedom, and thus it makes sense that it would have a place in this poem’s discussion about the attempt to regulate material freedoms of various sorts. Ornament came under the scrutiny of the English court system in a literal sense through the sumptuary law of 1363, which prohibited certain clothing materials, styles, and accoutrements according to social status and income. In attempting to restrict sartorial self-expression according to socioeconomic hierarchies, this law effectively outlined a spectrum of sartorial self-fashioning in which the wealthiest aristocrats enjoyed almost complete freedom of aesthetic self-expression, being told to “wear at their pleasure” [usent a lour volunte] and, correspondingly, in which each lesser socioeconomic group was marked by increased aesthetic limitations, upon threat of forfeiture, according to their “estat & degree.” Unlike the French sumptuary laws at the end of the previous century, this law does not define vestimentary status according to the number of changes of clothes one is allowed to wear per year, but rather according to the cost of the materials of which the garments are made and the kinds of ornaments that adorn them. The fraught subject of changing and distinctive sartorial styles is captured by the 1363 statute’s overuse of the French word “manere”—used primarily to mean “after the fashion of”—which is used roughly fifteen times in the statutes on dress and negligibly in
the accompanying statutes.\footnote{In the passage on the attire of lesser esquires, for example, several ornaments are listed by name, while the numerous styles and uses of embroidered and furred garments are subsumed under the prohibition of all ‘manner’ of these materials: “ne qils ne usent drap dor de seye ne dargent, ne nule manere de vesture enbroidez, anel, fermaile, nouche dor, rubayn seynture, ne.null autre apparaill ne herneys dor ne dargent, ne riens de perre, de nule manere de pellure” [and that they wear no cloth of gold, nor silk, nor silver, nor no manner of clothing embroidered, ring, buttons, nor brooch of gold, ribbon, girdle, nor none other apparel, nor armor of gold nor of silver, nor nothing of stone nor no manner of fur].}\footnote{The rhetorical attempt to bring stasis to changeable vestimentary forms is also expressed through the long list of negated ornaments in this passage, which has a powerful aesthetic effect of its own, and which one might compare to Chaucer’s arresting negative anaphora in his Boethian lyric “Former Age,” based on the previously discussed poem II.m.5, in which Chaucer quantifies through repeated grammatical negation the excesses of contemporary life. Two of Chaucer’s anaphoric lines in this poem address fourteenth-century dyeing processes: “No madder, welde, or wood no litestere [dyer] / Ne knew; the flees was of his former hewe.”} The sumptuary statute of 1363 endeavored to regulate material changeability itself, attempting to halt and reverse social mobility and aesthetic change by legislating official categories of stable visual adornment. This regulation failed in a practical sense; it was repealed the year after it was written, and a parliamentary petition to create a similar statute in 1378–79 was denied by King Richard.\footnote{Moreover, as Claire Sponsler has argued, the long lists of objects not allowed to lower members of society in this statute counteracted the statute’s ostensible purposes, effectively generating a more targeted consumer appetite for specific prohibited goods rather than suppressing their use; I would add, this phenomenon was no doubt heightened by the statute’s unwitting designation of sartorial self-fashioning as the ultimate symbol of material freedom.\footnote{While Chaucer’s judicial portrayal of Fortune’s stripping of her ornament, her face \textit{sanz peinture}, in the early 1380s most likely had no direct correlation with the legal forfeiture of outlawed garments dictated by these statutes, each text implicitly places similar pressure on the material and literary tropes of social mobility. Whereas the sumptuary law regulates the “outrageouse & excessive apparaill des plusours gentz, contre lour estate & degree” [the outrageous and excessive apparel of divers people, against their estate and degree], for example, Chaucer’s poem ends with the striking suggestion that its complaints against} Thus, in a cultural gesture similar to that of Chaucer’s “Balades de Visage sanz Peinture” and “Former Age,” the sumptuary statute of 1363 endeavored to regulate material changeability itself, attempting to halt and reverse social mobility and aesthetic change by legislating official categories of stable visual adornment. This regulation failed in a practical sense; it was repealed the year after it was written, and a parliamentary petition to create a similar statute in 1378–79 was denied by King Richard.\footnote{Moreover, as Claire Sponsler has argued, the long lists of objects not allowed to lower members of society in this statute counteracted the statute’s ostensible purposes, effectively generating a more targeted consumer appetite for specific prohibited goods rather than suppressing their use; I would add, this phenomenon was no doubt heightened by the statute’s unwitting designation of sartorial self-fashioning as the ultimate symbol of material freedom.\footnote{While Chaucer’s judicial portrayal of Fortune’s stripping of her ornament, her face \textit{sanz peinture}, in the early 1380s most likely had no direct correlation with the legal forfeiture of outlawed garments dictated by these statutes, each text implicitly places similar pressure on the material and literary tropes of social mobility. Whereas the sumptuary law regulates the “outrageouse & excessive apparaill des plusours gentz, contre lour estate & degree” [the outrageous and excessive apparel of divers people, against their estate and degree], for example, Chaucer’s poem ends with the striking suggestion that its complaints against}
Fortune’s excesses may enable the speaker’s own socioeconomic advancement, making it possible, in Fortune’s words, “[t]hat to som beter estate he may atteyne” (79).

The literary motif of Fortune’s concealment through dyes, paints, rouges, and other materials was a favorite of Chaucer’s, and it seems to have originated in a passage spoken by Philosophy at the beginning of Book II of the *Consolatio* when she first introduces the topic of the “multiform” goddess: *Intellego multiformes illius prodigii fucos* (II.pr.1.3), a phrase that Chaucer translates in the *Boece* as “I undirstonde the felefolde [manifold] colours and desceytes of thilke merveyelous monstre Fortune” (II.pr.1.14–16). “Colour” in this period connotes not only stylistic devices, but also literal “coloring matter” such as pigments and dyes, and thus implicitly corresponds to the use of “peinture” (which also means “pigment or dye, paint, coloring matter”) in the title of his Boethian poem on Fortune. The twofold meaning of Fortune’s “peinture” or “colour” is clear in the poem; Chaucer’s reference to Socrates as knowing well “the deceit of hir colour” (21) and the poem’s central distinction between “[f]rend of effect and frend of countenaunce” (34) both rely on the play between rhetorical and material deception. In this manner the poem underscores Chaucer’s interest in the transformative power of clothing dyes, a trope inherited not only from Boethius’s use of Tyrian dyes and purple clothes as prime examples of coveted luxury goods in the *Consolatio* (for example, II.m.5.9), but also from Trevet’s previously mentioned commentary on this text, which spends a significant amount of time elucidating Boethius’s trope, most evocatively when it seize on the double meaning of Boethius’s term *venenum* as both “dye” and “poison” to evocatively associate dyed cloth with blackened, poisoned bodies. As scholars have pointed out, Chaucer’s own exploration of this theme in the previously mentioned lyric “Former Age,” which circulated alongside his “Balades de Visage sanz Peinture” in medieval manuscripts, suggests specific concerns about imported consumer goods and the industrial abuses of contemporary English dyeing processes as well as about the general perception that dyed cloth ‘taints’ its subjects with the mark of covetys.

Chaucer borrows heavily from his French predecessors in his various descriptions of Fortune, but his portrayals almost always scrutinize in a particularly Chaucerian way the material territory of the subject. In the same passage from his *Boece* mentioned above, Chaucer, like Guillaume de Machaut, translates Boethius’s *prodigium* as “monstre,” and in doing so is one of the first to introduce the word to English readers. But unlike Machaut, Chaucer reduplicates the characteristics of Boethius’s *prodigium:* her *fuci*—paints, rouges—are not merely “colours” but “colours and desceytes”; she is
not merely a prodigy, but a “merveylous monster”: a marvelous marvel, a monstrous monster, an ominous omen. Fortune’s phenomenology, therefore, is material and quantifiable: as a monster (from Lat. *monstrare,* “to show,” *monere,* “to warn”), she shows or warns us, but in a doubly material way.

This doubling can be seen in Chaucer’s somewhat unique inclusion of a mirror as part of Fortune’s symbolic accoutrements in his poem. In the *Roman de la Rose,* as I discuss above, Fortune expressly invokes the power of the self-gaze, watching herself as she dresses in luxury goods and as she plunges from vestimentary riches to poverty. In Chaucer’s “Balades de Visage sanz Peinture,” this practice materializes in the form of a marvelous object, a mirror possessed by Fortune that can distinguish true friends from false ones: as the plaintiff puts it, he must learn “[t]o knowen frend fro fo in thy mirour” (10). This description derives from a passage in Boethius’s *Consolatio* that explicitly discusses the goddess’s powers in terms of feigned countenances: first Fortune “uncovers” herself (*aperire* [II.pr.8.1]) and then the protagonist’s friends; in the words of Chaucer’s *Boece:* “this ilke Fortune hath departed and uncovered to the bothe the certein visages and eek the doutous visages of thi felawes” (II.pr.8.36–39). While the mirror is said to distinguish one’s true friends, and also clearly invokes Fortune’s own changeable countenance as suggested by the title of the work, a mirror is, first and foremost, a luxury object meant for seeing oneself, rather than others. As such it underscores the important suggestion that Fortune can reveal one’s own self-deception as well as the deceit of others, a concept whose importance to Chaucer is evidenced by the fact that he added this notion as one of the few supplements to his sources in his version of II.m.5 in the *Boece,* when he describes how the people of the first age “ne distroyede nor deceivede nat hemself with outrage” (II.m.5.3–5).

Chaucer’s interest in Fortune’s material doubling implicitly questions her symbolic function, investigating whether she is a figure for the external changes that one experiences through material goods, as Boethius suggests, or a figure for the material fashioning of the self, as we see in Jean de Meun. While “Balades de Visage sanz Peinture” rests on the notion that she paints herself, the Merchant’s Tale, for example, depicts her monstrosity in her ability to paint her gifts: “[o] monstre, that so subtilly kanst peynte / Thy yiftes under hewe of stidefastnesse” (*CT* 4.2062–63), says the tale’s narrator in an apostrophe just prior to January’s sudden blindness and subsequent cuckold-ing. Chaucer likewise encapsulates Fortune’s dyadic ornamental powers over both others and herself in the following lines from her extended description in the *Book of the Duchess:*
An ydole of fals portrayture
Ys she, for she wol sone wrien;
She is the monstres hed ywrien,
As fylthe over-ystrawed with floures.
(626–29)

Chaucer’s most significant addition to this passage, which borrows heavily from Machaut’s Motet VIII, consists of his depiction of the twofold nature of Fortune’s change: playing on the double meaning of the dogmatically English word *wrien* to mean alternately “to turn” and “to cover, clothe, or adorn,” he inextricably connects Fortune’s ability to turn (her spinning wheel or her face) with her disguised appearance. Here likewise Chaucer alludes to Fortune’s confused agency as a simultaneous executor and object of change: on the one hand she actively turns the wheel, *wrien*, and on the other she is an object upon which unnamed others perform (past-participial) actions: her head is *covered* (*ywrien*); and her filth is *covered over* (*over-ystrawen*) with flowers.

In following Machaut’s emphasis on Fortune’s idolatrous nature in this passage, Chaucer further scrutinizes her problematic agency, for idolatry inherently concerns both adornment, in the sense that idolatry, or image-making, had been associated with (especially female) cosmetics since the patristic fathers, and also the status of objects themselves. In this period idolatry encompassed both the worship of crafted objects—Pygmalion was a favorite medieval example of idolatry—and the more mundane act of coveting things: Chaucer’s Parson repeatedly states that “an avaricious man is the thraldom of ydolatrie” (*CT* 10.747). Chaucer further complicates this notion in the above passage from the *Book of the Duchess*, however, by suggesting that Fortune is an “ydole” because she, unlike the true, changeless God, will “sone” change (626–27). This observation puts pressure on the question of Fortune’s criminal changeability, in effect asking whether her main crime is that she is an *object* that represents the worship of objects, or that she is an object that can transform itself, thus upending the definition of object. If the latter, Fortune’s changeability again appears to pose questions about the potential agency acquired by similarly objectified, reified subjects.

Chaucer engages these questions in a new way in the short poem titled “Against Women Unconstant” by modern editors. In this poem Chaucer associates late-medieval women’s consumer behavior with Fortune’s stereotypical characteristics. For instance, the narrator addresses a certain unnamed “madam’s” distinctive instability in the familiar terms of idolatry (“Ye might
be shryned for your brotelnesse” [15]); he claims that her “werkes” will bear witness that things come and go but never stay for long in her “mirour” (10; 8); and he describes her as changing her mind “as a wedercok, that turneth his face / With every wind” (12–13). While the poet ostensibly speaks here of the lady’s discarded lovers, the metaphors he chooses are overwhelmingly consumer-oriented: she loves “newefangelnesse” (1); her desire is always for “newe thing[s]” (6); when she loses one thing (or one lover?), she can buy two more: “ye can wel tweyn purchace” (19). The lady’s changing garments generate the main imagery and the refrain for the poem: “In stede of blew, thus may ye were al grene.” This sartorial shift from steadfast blue to capricious green echoes an earlier poem by Machaut, and its powerful draw as a trope is suggested by its repeated imitation by later medieval writers, as I will discuss in the next section. This refrain is not the only vestimentary conceit used to describe the lady’s changeability: the last image before the final refrain introduces another, in which the lady is said to have discarded her winter woolens for her summer weeds (“Al light for somer (ye woot wel what I mene)” [20]), an image that Chaucer uses to great effect in his “Proverbe” and that I have discussed at length in my introduction. While “Against Women Unconstant” does not mention Fortune directly, it hardly needs to; in depicting a lady whose “lust” for “newe thing[s]” (6) manifests in mutable, changing colors and garments on several fronts, the poem offers itself as the fourteenth-century conclusion to Jean de Meun’s earlier humanizing of the goddess: here, it is not Fortune who takes up the material markers of fashionable women, but a fashionable woman who has taken on the material characteristics of Fortune.

WEARING FORTUNE’S GARMENTS
IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

The color-change motif that provides the refrain for Chaucer’s poem becomes more central to later figurations of Fortune than the earlier trope in which Fortune displayed manifold changes of garments themselves. While the notion of Fortune’s ‘robe of many colors’ existed as early as Boccaccio, writers in the fifteenth century greatly expanded the image, vividly imagining Fortune’s garment as a veritable rainbow of colors that fluctuated according to her mood. Lydgate leads the way with the sheer quantity and range of his examples, as in the following description from the Fall of Princes:

Hir habit was of manyfold colours,
Lydgate’s description presents Fortune’s myriad colors as largely diluted or simulated: her gown is “watchet” or light blue, “liht greene,” and “feynte” black; the colors are mixed (“meynte”) or feigned (“feyned”; “pretens”); the gold is “alloyed” with a base metal. Not only are the colors of her garment always changing but also their mixed state inherently compromises and debases their quality. The passage artfully straddles literary tradition and fifteenth-century material culture. It invokes the allegorical trope of the multicolored garment used by earlier writers and at the same time gestures toward the fashion-conscious markets and courts of medieval England, where, by the time Lydgate was writing, all the colors listed—blue, gold, green, red, white, black, and various multicolored fabrics—were available for purchase. Lydgate’s allusion to Fortune’s mixed or contaminated colors speaks on the one hand to its Boethian inheritance, the aforementioned cloth-dyeing trope that both Boethius and Chaucer associate with rhetorical and material corruption, and on the other to contemporary consumer appetite for new colors and color combinations, which changed rapidly and dramatically as the fifteenth century progressed. “Colored” cloth being another name for dyed (versus nondyed) cloth, Fortune’s colored garments strike here at the very heart of late-medieval vestimentary consumption.

Fortune’s specific colors mark her as a particular type of consumer in other ways as well. Because of its association with “chaung & doubilnesse,” green was the color used most often to link fickle character with fickle consumer practices; in his misogynist tour de force “Examples Against Women,” Lydgate describes the disloyal Delilah, like the lady in Chaucer’s “Against Women Unconstant,” as shunning blue clothing, which is “stedfast & clene” (76), in favor of “thynges newe” (74) and “chaungis of many dyvers grene” (77). The color green was beginning to have another important association, however, one glimpsed in Lydgate’s description of Fortune in yet another poem as wearing a changeable gown of “gawdy grene”:

Hyr whele was redy to turne without let.
Hyr gowne was of gawdy grene chamelet,
Chaungeable of sondry dyuerse colowres,  
To the condycyons accordyng of hyr shoures.  
(“Assembly of Gods,” 319–22)

Camlet was a costly fabric from the Near East, and in a technical sense the phrase “gawdy grene” describes a yellowish green dye made from weld, a dye that Chaucer singles out in his short poem “Former Age” as one of the symbols of England’s commercial saturation and degradation. The overlapping meanings of Middle English forms of “gaude” and “gaudi,” however—which denote trickery and artifice as well as ornamentation, finery, baubles, and fripperies—implies that in Lydgate’s time the word’s meaning was well on its way to taking on the modern sense of gaudy as meaning “excessively showy.” Perhaps following Machaut’s and Chaucer’s use of the green garment as a symbol for changeability, Lydgate’s self-portrait in the Siege of Thebes presents himself as modestly dressed “[i]n a Cope of blak / and not of grene” (73): that is, in the traditional black cope of the Benedictine monk, rather than in a fashionable green cope worn by fickle, materialistic people.

Fortune’s bicolored appearance in late-medieval manuscripts aligned her with one of the most prevalent color-oriented stylistic choices of late-medieval Europe, the parti-colored garment (see figure 2.3). This alternately white/black, and natural/dyed symbolism of Fortune was an evocative way to portray her aesthetic duality and her capriciousness, as bicolored attire was a novel fashion that, like stripes, privileged an unruly aesthetic that had previously been associated with criminal types. Culturally, however, bicolored garments were also understood through association with royal retinues, who were often clothed in bicolored livery with personal emblems, such as the “F” letters embroidered—for Fortuna—on Fortune’s gown in figure 2.3. As Paul Strohm has shown, the social unrest caused by personal retinues and rival factions meant that liveries themselves were commonly associated with lawlessness and disorder. They were therefore particularly apt symbols for Fortune both because they projected her unruliness and because they materialized a trope already associated with her figure: that of adorning her favorites in luxurious clothing.

The most striking fifteenth-century example linking Fortune to changing fashions, and my final example here, is found in Charles, duke of Orléans’s long poem in English, Fortunes Stabilnes. A member of the French royal family who was captured at the battle of Agincourt in 1415, Charles wrote the ambitious Boethian poem during his twenty-five-year captivity as a prisoner of war in England, and it was most likely circulated among the courtly households of his English “keepers” during this period. As Susan Crane has
Figure 2.3  A fifteenth-century manuscript of Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae* depicts Fortune in parti-colored garments ornamented with F’s for *Fortuna* (c. 1477). A prosperous family is situated next to the white side of the dress and a poor family next to the black side. © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved. London, British Library, MS Harley 4336, fol. 1v.
CHAPTER TWO

discussed, Charles used fashion in a particularly expressive way throughout his life, sewing poetic mottos onto his clothing as a young man in France, and wearing signature black garments from the age of fourteen, when his father was murdered, and throughout his captivity in England.65

Charles uses his own reputation for sartorial distinction in the fictionalized narrative of *Fortunes Stabilnes*. In a scene that helps to set up the sartorial symbolism of Fortune’s entrance, the first-person narrator (also named Charles, duke of Orléans) is prompted by Venus to describe how he lives: “But how lede you yowre lijf?” (4801). He answers in vestimentary terms: “As an ancre [hermit], Madame, in clothis blake” (4802). Venus comments on his recent change in appearance, trying to interpret its social significance: “So thynkith me ye haue professioun take / Or ellis ye cast to fonde sum ordir newe, / For strike ye are from Rossett out and blewe” (4803–5). Charles replies that he wears his colors inward—the “rosett” of his heart is dressed in “blew,” in which his painful thoughts are wrapped in “tawny” (4808, 4807, 4811)—and then states his intention to remain in black for the rest of his life: “And to my deth in blak my silf y bide” (4812). The narrator goes on to imply that this choice of dress signifies the death of his unnamed beloved lady, an explanation that might have surprised readers who knew of Charles’s own unique use of the color black as a symbol of his father’s death. Unlike Lydgate’s self-portrait in *Siege of Thebes*, therefore, where the black garment does signify his “ordir” as a Benedictine monk, Charles’s black garment seems to generate varied meanings, and therefore, as Venus’s hermeneutic confusion reveals, to be more open to multiple interpretations. Black was from the end of the fourteenth century and throughout the first half of the fifteenth century an extremely fashionable color to wear among aristocrats, well liked for its ability to throw into relief shiny metallic ornaments, bright brocades, and colorful linings, and particularly dramatic in portraits.66 Even as Charles portrays his aesthetic as distinct and invariable, therefore, it would clearly have held currency in fashionable circles. Perhaps in describing his thoughts as colorfully dressed and “covert” (4809) beneath his black exterior, for example, Charles was making a reference to the use of multiple colors in the interior linings of his dark attire.

The narrator’s invariable black attire prepares the aesthetic landscape for Fortune’s extraordinary mutability of colors. Of the thirteen stanzas devoted exclusively to Fortune’s physical appearance in the poem, Charles uses eleven to describe her clothing. And just as he focuses the reader’s attention on questions of interpretation regarding his narrator’s attire, so his description of Fortune demonstrates a heightened attention to hermeneutic processes:
That forto say yow how she ware hir gere
Hit was ydoon hardly at poyn devyse,
And if that y shall say you what sche were—
But, verry god, me þouȝt it passyn gnyse
(All though it riche were of a wondir prise!)
For euymore the coloure gan to chaunge,
So semyd me hir surcot verry straunge,

For the body was kowchid thorugh & thorugh
As euymore a Saphir and a balayse,
That to biholde it, as y tolde yow now,
So as the playtis vp and downe arayse,
So did dyuerse the hewe in sondry wise,
For, though on wey the Safir shewid blew,
This way the balise geveth a purpil hew.
(4974–87)

As he introduces the goddess, the narrator makes a point of distinguishing
his own two-tiered reaction to her clothing. He takes care to illustrate that
his first instinct, and the expectation he presumes for “yow” his reader, is to
describe how Fortune wears her attire: “how she ware hir gere.” The phras-
ing implies an interesting cultural preference for descriptions of vestimentary
style and mode of display and suggests the role that literary narratives might
have played in circulating new methods of self-fashioning to eager courtly
audiences. Charles’s second and equally important object is to explain the
garments themselves: how she wears her clothing, he insists, is nothing com-
pared to what she wears, “what sche were.” Whereas her overall appearance
suggests scrupulous attention to detail, “poyn devyse,” the items that she
wears, he says, strike him as utterly extraordinary, “passynge nyse.”

“Nyse” was a word also used in fifteenth-century England to connote the
more “ordinary” vice of sartorial self-indulgence, and Charles’s subsequent
description of Fortune’s attire takes care, even as it enumerates her extraordi-
nary garments, to suggest that her “verry straunge” clothing has modern-day
explanations.67 The unusual surcote (or sideless gown) in the passage above,
for example, whose “vp” and “downe” movement and changing colors appear
to mirror the movement of Fortune’s wheel, actually proves to be a trick of
the eye: the material, says Charles, is studded with sapphires and balas rubies
in such a way that the movement of the folds of the dress causes the color
to look blue one moment and purple the next. Later we find out that the
surcoat’s ermine trim is also in fact a more modest material, the gauze-like “plesaunce” (4990), finely pleated and set with ornamental eyes. As he describes at length Fortune’s marvelous garments, Charles strives over and over to add realistic explanations, most often including detail about the making of the garment: various forms of “make” or “wrought” are sprinkled generously throughout the long passage (4990, 5006, 5007, 5011, 5023), including the specific detail that the lining of her mantle is “with nedill wrought” (5016). The garments are also repeatedly described as “praty,” or well made (5010, 5017). Like her surcoat, Fortune’s mantle seems magically to change color, but here again, Charles asks the reader to consider more closely the materials from which the garment is made:

Of which the colour blak nor grene it nas
But most lijk to a raynbow hewe it was,
Forwhi the silkis were so verry straunge
That ay from blew to reed or grene þei chaunge.
(4998–5001)

As Mary-Jo Arn points out in the notes to her edition of this text, Charles seems to refer here to shot silk (aptly called changeant in French), a popular fabric in this period that created a changeable, iridescent effect by using different colors for the warp-threads and weft-threads of a fabric. Other aspects of Fortune’s garment point toward their materials and craftsmanship in similar ways: the elaborately “wrought” (5007) images of changing clouds and waxing and waning moons correspond to the fashion for embroidered heraldic mantles; likewise, the fluttering leaves on the border of the mantle—some fastened loosely, some firmly, according to the narrator (5014)—suggest the late-medieval penchant for dagged edges. Finally, despite its ethereal composition of rainbows, clouds, moons, and “litill, litill flowris soft” (5018), the mantle as a whole betrays a hefty physicality: it is so voluminous and so heavy, says Charles, that it needs numerous cords to tie it (4996–97).

Charles’s interest in examining the techniques behind Fortune’s spectacularly variable attire pushes her figuration well beyond the literary trope. While his description certainly plays with the inherited idea of the goddess’s twofold nature as both divine and worldly, his purpose seems more to demystify Fortune’s garments for his readers than to engage her poetic hybridity. Several aspects of the portrait parallel contemporary manuscript illuminations of Fortune, and at times the description reads as if Charles were examining such an illumination with the specific purpose of recre-
ating the clothing in material form. His description carries none of the implicit (and often explicit) disapproval in Lydgate’s descriptions of sartorial excess, Fortune’s or others’; on the contrary, Charles’s uncovering of the tricks of the trade behind her showy appearance revels in the evident ingenuity and skill inherent in the garments his narrator witnesses. While Charles does at moments include potentially moralizing detail, such as the way Fortune’s surcoat “counterfeits” ermine (4989), a keyword often used to target fashionable attire in medieval England, it is with the apparent intention of describing how well the technical imitation looks and performs. Such details certainly imply that, like Boethius’s narrator in the opening of the Consolatio, the narrator of Fortunes Stabilnes is easily seduced by the material goods Fortune has at her command. In spite of this well-used literary trope, however, what the combined elements of Charles’s portrait ultimately offer the reader is a version of Fortune’s “straunge” clothing, her central signifier, that seems comprehensible, desirable, and largely attainable—at least, for this royal poet and his courtly audience—in its ornamental detail, purchasable materials, sensory experience, and visual effects. She is a figure of self-fashioning whose fashions work very hard to sell themselves.

The object most creative in this regard is Fortune’s necklace, which is said literally to proclaim fashion’s presence—“A serpe, the fasson to declare” (5022). This necklace is made (“wrought” once again [5023]) from sets of hanging, twirling, falling dice whose movements seem to help Charles the narrator better comprehend the “how” and “whi” of life:

To se them how they werle abowt
Hit wondir was, withouten dowt,
Whi they turnyd so many chaunsis
And that so ful of verryaunces!
(5026–29)

While these “whirling” dice—a word Charles perhaps borrows from line 11 of Chaucer’s “Fortune”—do not replace the more traditional iconography of Fortune’s wheel in this text, which is introduced along with her crown in subsequent stanzas, they do more accurately represent the larger symbolic program of Charles’s portrait. On the one hand the dice, like the garments described earlier, help modernize Boethius’s image of Fortune’s seductive gifts: high-quality fake ermine, shot silks, and games of hazard speak more directly to the mundane excesses of late-medieval aristocratic life than do the generic garments of Boethius’s text. On the other hand, this ornamental object also suggests the extent to which her figuration presents material
consumption as a—or even the—crucial and achievable aspect of her power. Fortune’s powers over change are not merely “declared” to be fashion in this text; they are encapsulated and appropriated by fashion, as her most fearsome powers of transience have literally become a bauble to be worn around a lady’s neck.

An important effect of this late-medieval shift in Fortune’s iconography toward clothes that symbolize changeability in their colors and styles, rather than those that represent change through their disrobing or exchange, is that Fortune often loses the other side of her sartorial persona—her fallen, impoverished, poorly dressed self. The authorial tendency to avoid this symbolism of dearth culminates in Charles’s text, which uniquely situates its narrative not in Fortune’s changeability, but, as its current title suggests, in her “stabilnes.” The protagonist’s ironic complaints about Fortune’s stability are largely generated by what he sees as his own continuous misfortune, which, he says, belies the notion that fortune’s favors are cyclical. They also, however, apply to his figure of Fortune, whose sartorial representation, as in many of the other versions of her late-medieval figuration that I have discussed here, effectively only performs the luxurious, “fortunate” aspects of her personality, and never the fallen figure that we see so provocatively displayed in Jean de Meun’s passage in the Roman de la Rose. Taking Fortune as a symbol for the conspicuous consumer, as I have been suggesting, we can see that this one-sided view of her consumer habits also assigns a certain paradoxical stability to the ornamented, self-fashioned subject: the idea that wearing Fortune’s garments, or fashioning the self through ever-changing attire and ornament, as she does, creates a register of constancy in an otherwise inconstant world.

CONCLUSION

If fashion had become the domain of Fortune in the fifteenth century, the same cannot be said about the following centuries, in which interest in Fortune’s changing dress drops off precipitously. Unlike the highly ornate illuminations of luxuriously dressed Fortune in late-medieval manuscripts, for instance, early modern print culture usually imagined Fortune as a naked or partially naked figure, usually holding a sail or cloth and standing on a boat or a ball.73 In a similar way, the literary trope of glimpsing Fortune’s face sans peinture develops into the more provocative idea of seeing her without any clothing; as one fallen character puts it in the sixteenth-century compilation Mirror for Magistrates, a text conceived as a continuation of Lydgate’s Fall of
Princes: “Wouldest thou beholde false Fortune in her kind / Note well my life so shalt thou see her naked / Ful fayre before, but toto foule behind.”

One possible reason for this relative lack of interest in Fortune’s fluctuating and fashionable garments is that in the early modern period many of the associations with clothing and consumption once belonging to medieval Fortune are taken on by a new personification, Fashion.

The cultural work accomplished by the figure of Fortune in its probing of the crucial link between changing clothing and self-fashioning, then, seems to be almost entirely premodern in scope, and so amplified toward the end of the medieval period that the age-old figure of Fortune becomes a type of proxy for the newest and most culturally loaded consumer practices. In her role as a figure for the self-fashioning subject who follows the vacillating tides of fashion, Fortune serves two main purposes in medieval culture. On the one hand, as many of the examples above illustrate, she is a convenient figure upon which to hang moralized castigations of luxury attire and materialism: following the lessons of Boethius’s *Consolatio* and Pseudo-Boethius’s *De disciplina scholarium*, the well-dressed person was doomed to fall quickly into rags. On the other hand, as we saw in Charles d’Orléans’s *Fortunes Stabilnes* and other later works, Fortune also provided an unexpected model to readers as a human(ized) subject whose wholesale embrace of changeable goods did not lead to her downfall—as a subject who takes charge of her own material destiny and who remains, against all odds and expectations, obstinately stable.