Fashioning Change
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The chapters of this book have treated the symbolic function of clothing in medieval literature and culture by examining the theoretical roots and the material circumstances of a single multifaceted trope—vestimentary change—in high- and late-medieval Europe. After demonstrating the importance of this trope to the dominant medieval theory of material change, that of Boethius’s *Consolatio Philosophiae*, I turned my attention to tracing the literary development of vestimentary change as an organizing principle for the perception and experience of ornamentation from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. I have in effect mapped this historical development twice: first, in chapter 2, through a discussion of the high- and late-medieval transformations of Boethius’s theory into praxis, as evidenced by the practical reception of his text and by the changing ornament and function of the goddess Fortune as the Middle Ages progress. I then revisited this evolution more slowly and from different perspectives in chapters 3 through 5 by examining a particular cultural tension in each century that is explored through the trope of vestimentary changeability: standards of ecclesiastical dress in the thirteenth century, powers of wiely consumption in the fourteenth century, and cultural aesthetics of excess in the fifteenth century.

Throughout these chapters my central aim has been to reveal *alteration* as one of the enduring structural elements of the medieval experience and perception of clothing and ornament. The intrinsic ability of clothing both to symbolize and to enact change existed before it became the primary agent of systemic change in the fashion system that took root during the period
of this study, but its codification in this system magnified and accelerated its properties of changeability in a way that seems to have been especially provocative and fascinating for English writers of the period, who found in fashion’s ceaseless diversity an unexpectedly powerful and negotiable cultural trope. On the one hand, I have shown how writers used the trope of clothing to examine the way changing ideas in their cultures were materially manifested: how certain clothing styles became associated with the goddess Fortune, or how transformations in ecclesiastical dress reflected current ideas about comfort, style, and status. On the other hand, I have shown how these writers used clothing to explore the effects of the material world more generally upon high- and late-medieval ideologies: for example, how material mutability gets taken up as a prompt for thinking through ideas about English national identity, about bourgeois aesthetics, about poetic style, and about the concept of “change” itself in the medieval imaginary.

The findings about clothing in this study can be usefully extended to material culture at large. Recent work in material culture has explored the potency of material objects as intermediaries of the material world that make meaning in their own right. The “new materialism” popularized by Bill Brown demands that we turn our critical attention to the ways in which unsung material objects “organize our public and private affection.” Daniel Miller has similarly described the importance of examining our habitual cultural practices and beliefs involving material objects, a critical method that he calls “the ethnographic experience of the mundane,” of which he offers as a prime example “the intimate relationship . . . between ourselves and our clothing.” Webb Keane also uses clothing as an important example for understanding the way objects guide our cultural practices and the ideologies connected to those practices. Keane is especially interested in what he calls “the openness” of things and their historicizing significations: the ability of an object to signify meaning beyond the subject who interprets it or the historical moment in which it exists. While the many meanings of medieval clothing have been the subject of substantial critical work, especially in the last decade, *Fashioning Change* is the first study to situate medieval vestimentary discourses within this larger conversation about the potential of material objects to make cultural meaning not only legible, but possible. If this material potentiality is brought upon our understanding of objects as they figure in literary texts, then we have greater means at our disposal to think through more traditional literary uses of clothing symbolism, such as in allegorical hermeneutics, and how these uses cohabit with other modes of signification within a text. Rethinking the multivalences of medieval material objects in literary texts reveals that there is not as much of a gap between the literary
world of objects and the material world of objects as there was once thought to be. This kind of consideration allows us to reexamine the symbolic function of objects in high- and late-medieval Europe, a culture that could signal its fascination with patient Griselda’s clothing, for example, but that refused unilateral interpretations of that clothing, preferring instead to offer multiple perspectives—in Chaucer’s case, as an allegory of the Christian soul and as a commentary on the dressing and spending habits of bourgeois wives. Likewise, it allows us to conceive of a culture in which Tertullian’s pallium, Boethius’s prison garb, Bishop Durand’s capa, Chaucer’s pilch, and the differentiated black garments of Lydgate and Charles d’Orléans could speak simultaneously to those individuals’ experiences with regard to material objects and to their philosophical and poetical pursuit of immaterial knowledge in a material world.

Finally, the historical period that I study in this book marks an important shift in the cultural perspective about ornament and change that will develop more profoundly in later periods. In high- and late-medieval English culture, what seems trivial—fashion and its objects—becomes an occasion for re-envisioning and reinvention. The cult of novelty embraced by late-medieval gaulant poems is the most dramatic illustration of this impulse, but even where I use examples of writers who explicitly resist sartorial change, such as in Durand’s Rationale, or who depict infelicitous changes, such as in Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale, clothing still effectively functions as a way of embracing change, in that the garments described are themselves modified to signal types of permanence. This paradoxical gesture, which moralizes changing fashions on the one hand and delights in using clothing to effectuate change on the other, can help to shed light on other historical moments in which we see the most resistance to material change. Turning our attention to the ways in which reform is being materially signaled in these early texts, for example, allows us to see a connection between the changing fashions in the late-medieval period and the reforms of the early modern period, in which the condemnation of ornament features so prominently. The Reformation and pre-Reformation “stripping of the altars”—which, as late as the nineteenth century, was blamed for England’s subsequent dearth of ornamental style—makes explicit the connection between politics, aesthetics, and literary style that can be found implicitly in high- and late-medieval England. Looking forward to the large-scale changes in material practices brought about by the Reformation provides further evidence that clothing was understood not simply in terms of superficial garb and interpretation but rather as a serious literary and worldly object, whose criticality becomes even more evident when it becomes targeted as the medium of material corruption.