

Andrea Denny-Brown. *Fashioning Change: The Trope of Clothing in High- and Late-Medieval England.* Interventions: New Studies in Medieval Culture Series. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2012. 252 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8142-1190-8.



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Commissioned by Matt Vester (West Virginia University)

Change was afoot in late medieval England. Amid this change, social categories became more fluid, and clothing and ornament functioned as markers of that fluidity. In her book, *Fashioning Change*, a part of the Interventions: New Studies in Medieval Culture series, Andrea Denny-Brown hones in on that fluidity. Rather than consider the role of material goods in, or the development of, fashion during this time period, this monograph seeks a broader landscape. In line with the work of scholars like E. Jane Burns (*Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Literature* [2002]), Susan Crane (*The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity during the Hundred Years' War* [2002]), Sarah-Grace Heller (*Fashion in Medieval France* [2007]), and Martha Howell (*Commerce before Capitalism in Europe, 1300-1600* [2010]), Denny-Brown deftly analyzes myriad texts, mainly from England, to assess the significance of clothing, clothing as a vehicle for commentary on change, self-fashioning through clothing, and the structure of literary works in speaking to the experience of transfor-

mation. No stranger to the study of material objects, Denny-Brown situates this work at the crux of literary studies and material culture and offers insights that will be compelling to scholars of all stripes.[1]

In this book, fashion plays a role contextually. Fashioning, as the title suggests, is the key to understanding the change from which medieval people both benefited and suffered. Medieval authors wrote about characters donning material objects within a fashion system, and through the literary use of those objects we learn about medieval experience and understandings. In her own words, “clothing and ornament became the primary medium of change ... at precisely the moment when ... the phenomenon called ‘fashion,’ devoted explicitly to the notion of restless change, began to materialize as a cultural system” (p. 50). In five chapters, three of which include material that has appeared in earlier publications, Denny-Brown pursues the trope of “vestimentary changeability” from Boethius through the fif-

teenth century to examine ideas of materiality and the meaning of life (p. 3).

Clothing can be difficult to pin down as a cultural marker. In a world in which materials were costly and visual cues vital, clothing and ornaments were key to communicating individuals' social aspirations. In addition, as Denny-Brown points out through explanations of work by material culture theorists, clothing and ornament were powerful because they were quotidian; they were taken for granted and thus are central to understanding the culture. In this work, she adds a third dimension to consider: clothing, as a part of an established fashion system, by the late Middle Ages was continually in flux. This mutability, as she explains, reflects and responds to medieval understandings of lived experience. In sum, these markers are slippery, but central to understanding medieval culture. To begin her work, she takes her reader back to the sixth century, well before the advent of medieval fashion, with Boethius's *Consolatio Philosophiae*. Denny-Brown argues that Boethius's protagonist's dialogue with Fortune, through Philosophy, ultimately emphasized self-possession over object-possession and framed a discussion of the transitory function of material goods throughout the medieval West. As she explains, "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" (p. 18).

Denny-Brown begins her second chapter by examining clothing as a medium of change in the thirteenth century, a century often bypassed for the richer fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the history of English literature. Considering *De disciplina scholarium*, an anonymous text attributed to Boethius, she explains that Boethius's concerns with the lure of material goods and the dan-

gers of vestimentary change were alive and well at this time. By chapter's end, she extends her discussion to include fourteenth- and fifteenth-century texts. These post-Boethius writings, in particular, are fascinating because while Boethius kept his language devoid of variation when describing Fortune's dress, writers like Jean de Meun and Charles d'Orléans supplied layers upon layers of sartorial descriptors, from a "scented and brightly coloured" robe to a surcote peppered with "sapphires and balas rubies" to a necklace of dancing dice (pp. 62, 77, 79). Denny-Brown argues that this "tropical evolution" of Fortune's fashion suggests that writers commented on cultural change, exactly when ideas of fashion themselves were developing (p. 59). A trope of clothing, therefore, became a trope of change. She sees *fashioning* in clear form at this moment when the authors "begin to scrutinize the experience of fashion as a mechanism of self-control, and the corresponding ability of the fashionable to take charge of their own material destinies" (p. 14). Fashion is a troublesome topic for thirteenth-, fourteenth-, and fifteenth-century authors, for it, like Fortune, is alluring, dangerous, seductive (Geoffrey Chaucer's Fortune is a monster), and can transform the self. Indeed, Denny-Brown suggests that some medieval writers used the self-fashioning figure of Fortune to scold those who were lured by material goods (along the lines of Boethius), while others showed that she achieved her power through fashion and by extension, so could the medieval reader.

Chapter 3, "The Case of the Bishop's *Capa*," leaves Fortune behind, but remains in the thirteenth century. Denny-Brown continues her examination of *varietas vestium*, or variety of clothing, but in the ecclesiastical rather than the secular world. Through a juxtaposition of William Durand's well-known *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, a defense of church garments and ornaments, with the lesser-known anonymous satirical poem "Song Upon the Tailors," Denny-Brown clarifies her point about the "problematic materialism

of representation” that emerges out of her previous chapter (p. 112). In his *Rationale*, Denny-Brown suggests, contra work by Dyan Elliott, that Durand, bishop of Mende in the late thirteenth century, faced great instability in descriptions of ecclesiastical dress, which compelled him to defend, however unevenly, a bishop’s “sartorial excess” as mirroring his “excessive devotion” (p. 89). To highlight this instability, Denny-Brown usefully contextualizes his explanation with Durand’s contemporaries, like Matthew Paris who criticized the avarice on display with processional *capas*, the sumptuary legislation of Lateran IV emphasizing a uniform style, and secondary sources that indicate such clerical garb included personal marks. The goliardic poem, “Song Upon the Tailors,” also emphasizes change and variation in ecclesiastical dress. This interesting poem traces the transformation that a *capa* undertakes as it is recycled for various purposes, with the literary emphasis on description of transformation (e.g., the garment is circumscribed) rather than the method of transformation (e.g., the tailoring details). Denny-Brown suggests that embedded within this poem are criticisms of ecclesiastical corruption via clothing alteration and offers an interesting analysis of the goliardic poem as a criticism of the logic underlying Durand’s later text.

In arguably her most interesting chapter, “In Swich Richesse: *Povre* Griselda and the All-Consuming *Archewyves*,” Denny-Brown offers a “materialist reading” of Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* and *Envoy* (fourteenth century) (p. 116). In the former’s focus on the “peple [*sic*]” (p. 120) rather than Griselda, Denny-Brown sees a clear criticism of materialism, and in the latter, a critique of mercantile wives who used their new found wealth in sartorial excess. Although the *Griselda* tale has been the focus of much study, Denny-Brown innovatively stresses the objects in Chaucer’s rendition and his emphasis on the audience who is mesmerized by these objects rather than by *Griselda*’s inner beauty (as Walter is able to see). Taking her analysis further, Denny-Brown argues that be-

cause Chaucer emphasized nonelite obsessions with new material goods he was commenting on “the changing consumer habits of his culture” that saw the nonelite, especially women, imbibing in vestimentary variation to a greater degree than before (p. 128). She cites historians’ work to suggest that merchants during this period, in an effort to ape their betters, favored consumption over investment, and that wives were often the target of sumptuary discourse, a context that helps her explain Chaucer’s interpretation of the *Griselda* story. While her emphasis on the sartorial *savoir faire* of the lower classes is refreshing, her suggestion that certain historical circumstances “played important roles in the cultural inscription of conspicuous consumption on the female body” is less convincing (p. 138). Although merchants often aspired to the status held by the landholding elite, they also invested in urban property and commercial ventures; the two were not mutually exclusive. Further, while it is true that England’s sumptuary laws suggest that the nonelite strived to flex sartorial symbols to their advantage, Kim Phillips posits that it was geared toward men more than women, which differs from the focus of much Italian sumptuary law.[2] Finally, while some scholarship suggests that women had increased economic freedom after the plague, which Denny-Brown includes as one historical circumstance affecting change in consumption patterns, this interpretation is not undisputed. Denny-Brown is quite right to place sumptuary discourse in the historical context of commercial change, and her work reveals the space for future scholarship that exists here.

Denny-Brown finishes her monograph with a discussion of the understudied late medieval English *galaunt*, a literary trope that writers included “to confront and organize questions about, among other things, the creative energies expressed by ever-changing fashions, about English *varietas vestium* as a national style, and about the connection between emerging literary and vestimentary aesthetics” (p. 149). Denny-Brown analyzes two

galaunt texts in chapter 5 that developed during moments of political and social crisis, the Uprising of 1381 and the Jack Cade rebellion of 1450. Unlike the sparse *Clerk's Tale* that upbraided sartorial excess, she states, the ornamental poetry in this genre celebrated the gallaunts' love of ever-changing clothing styles. It is also here that Denny-Brown further expands her examination of medieval culture to comment on the culture of play, elucidated by historian Johan Huizinga in his *Homo Ludens* (Playing man) (1938), as she espies it in the gallant poetry. Through her analysis of both substance and structure, Denny-Brown characterizes this poetry as a "form of cultural play" that provided an avenue for writers to explore the potentially destabilizing forces of fashion (p. 187).

Denny-Brown's central claim that clothing is "a cultural signifier of change" will appeal to many, and there is much here to enthuse a vast readership eager to think expansively about clothing in the past (p. 8). Throughout her work, she is attentive to how the literary structures of the writings support the authors' goals and her arguments, as well as to scholarship that supports and deviates from her findings. Readers will be motivated to pursue the understudied connections that Denny-Brown presents between medieval texts, the material objects within their lines and at the hands of their authors, and their historical contexts. The consistent signposting throughout the work may aid an advanced undergraduate audience, but the work is geared more to graduate students and scholars interested in studying clothing to grasp medieval self-expression and material culture. Denny-Brown shows effectively that the trope of sartorial variation communicates change as a central feature of medieval experience, and more than this, she reveals that vestments and ornaments are a gateway to understanding the hearts and minds of those enveloped in those materials.

Notes

[1]. Lisa H. Cooper and Andrea Denny-Brown, eds., *Lydgate Matters: Poetry and Material Culture in the Fifteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

[2]. Kim Phillips, "Masculinities and the Medieval English Sumptuary Laws," *Gender & History* 19, no. 1 (2007): 22-42.

("Masculinities and the Medieval English Sumptuary Laws," *Gender & History*, 2007)

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