

*Fashioning Change: The Trope of Clothing in High- and Late-Medieval England*, by Andrea Denny-Brown. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012. Pp 252. ISBN: 9780814211908.

*With Fashioning Change: The Trope of Clothing in High- and Late-Medieval England*, Andrea Denny-Brown presents scholars of fashion, material culture, and English literature with a complex and compelling study. She considers the variations of late-medieval English fashion through an examination of the tropes of clothing and fashion in literary sources. While several authors associated fashion with fickleness and feminizing frivolity, they nevertheless relied upon clothing imagery as a medium through which to explore human changeability. People's status, station, and even their nature were inherently unstable, and clothing provided the material means to demonstrate immaterial changes. As Denny-Brown argues, "in late medieval England this discourse reached the proportions of a national pastime" (10).

She focuses her first chapter on Boethius's *Consolatio philosophiae*, which, she argues, acted as "a type of textual prehistory to medieval English notions of sartorial changeability" (13). With the turning of Fortune's wheel, Boethius finds himself a man bereft of his possessions, even down to his clothing, "So the daily stripping and donning of garments—and the associated cycles of quickly changing fashions—offered a convenient, easily accessible trope for the constitutive experience of material acquisition, ownership, and loss" (16).

In her second chapter, "Fashioning Change," she examines the effects of the *Consolatio's* imagery, particularly Fortune's Wheel and Philosophy's robe, on late-medieval English discussions of consumption and fashion. Illuminations illustrating translations of the *Consolatio* depict kings in states of dress and undress falling and rising with the turn of Fortune's wheel. "These images 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" (55). The tropes of changeability from Boethius held such cultural appeal in late-medieval England precisely because the concept of fashion, and with it the ability of humans to alter themselves on a daily basis, had begun to take hold.

In chapter three, "The Case of the Bishop's Capa," Denny-Brown focuses on a specific garment—the episcopal capa (cape or cope) that became a prominent feature of a bishop's wardrobe in the thirteenth century. She analyzes the cope as it appears in two extremely different texts: the *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum*, by liturgical writer William Durand (1230-96), and a satirical poem

entitled “Song upon the Tailors.” Through their varying approaches to their subjects—Durand’s reverence and the anonymous poet’s derision—it becomes clear that the *capa* was an object of contention. What did fashion have to do with ecclesiastical dignity? Durand justified its usage through biblical precedent, while the author of “Song upon the Tailors” emphasized its mutations as the *capa* is ornamented from season to season, cast off and given to servants, and bizarrely circumcised and baptized. Denny argues that these extreme images “reexamine the ethics of aesthetic transformation itself in Church culture, whether that transformation involved the style of bishops’ copes or the style of their biblical interpretations” (113).

In her fourth chapter, “In Swich Richesse,” Denny-Brown examines the figure of Griselda in Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale*. Compared to the lavish descriptions of the costumes of Alisoun and the Wife of Bath, Griselda’s wardrobe receives a surprising lack of detail. Yet Denny-Brown insists that “the *Clerk’s Tale* is more profoundly invested in the implications of material ornament than perhaps any of the other *Tales*” (116). As Griselda is stripped or costumed according to her changing status, the two major descriptors of her clothing are *richesse* and *rudeness*. With the exception of Walter who is able to see through to her inner virtue, the other characters react negatively or positively to her according to the *richesse* or *rudeness* of her clothing. Their fickleness highlights the Clerk’s antimaterialism, which he roots in the association of *richesse* with changeability and *rudeness* with “virtuous constancy” (129). When considered in the context of audience, both the female audience of Griselda’s changing fortunes and the audience of the *Clerk’s Tale* itself, in particular the Wife of Bath, the Clerk targets women as those most fully prone to the seductive charms of material changeability. Denny-Brown continues this gendered antimaterialism with the consideration of the figure of Griselda in two of John Lydgate’s poems, “Bycorne and Chychevrache” and “Dyte of Womenhis Hornys,” both of which negatively link women and consumption. Yet she points out that the Clerk and Lydgate cannot decry female fascination with sartorial changeability without betraying an interest in both the trope and matter of it themselves.

She focuses her fifth chapter, “English Galaunts and the Aesthetic Event,” on the literary type of the *galaunt*, who features in late-medieval English poems as a type of anti-Griselda, a creature who bends according to the whims of fashion. In “On the Times,” a rhyming poem written in English and Latin from ca. 1380, the *galaunt* appears as a problematic figure associated with social, political, and economic disorder.

Denny-Brown concludes by reminding the reader that “stylistic playfulness”

acts as a valuable tool both for humans who play with fashion and writers who play with words (178). Fashion as a cultural phenomenon allowed late-medieval English writers to explore the philosophical implications of change in a variety of forms.

Denny-Brown's book contributes to multiple fields. Scholars of material culture and gender in particular will find these arguments intriguing. It complements works such as Laura Hodge's *Chaucer and Clothing: Fashioning Change* and Susan Crane's *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity during the Hundred Years War* in its consideration of the symbolic nature of clothing as well as the artifacts of clothing. While actual medieval garments may be few and far between, descriptions of them are more plentiful and equally telling. This book also contributes to the argument that clothes, both as literal and literary artifacts, are themselves possessive of gender and thus participate in contemporary discourse regarding men, women, and bodies. Such a discussion broadens the appeal of this book and links it to non-medieval conversations about female material culture, such as Mary C. Beaudry's *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing* and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*. Given that, as Denny-Brown succinctly states, "at once allegorical and material, old and new, public and private, clothing stretches to encompass the overlapping and ever-changing experiences of the body, the intellect, and the soul" (5), her book will hopefully inspire further such studies on this rich and inexhaustible subject.

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