

Fashion in Medieval France

M puelle d'or n'ont ne
 Une p'me ge or n'ont ne
 A uoit e q' n'ont ne
 A uelcort auques de cel estre.
 S o ces n'ont d'autel fait
 D ien le d' n'ont le cre
 E t sem la les estre or n'ont ne
 E t melouant r'amponeuse.
 A it sot bien faire r' bien p'rtire.
 E il qui sot tel p'mage
 D uel sembloit bien d' n'ont ne
 D e douleur r' de despit p'mante.
 E t fame qui petir seust.
 D onouer ce quele deust.
 E onuortise p'rtire.

...scouter.
 ...treous.
 ...pletaours.
 ...leur faueles.
 ...au ualles r' au vud es.
 ...ca ges pl es.
 ...de ic
 ...p'mage.
 ...enrage.
 ...d' l'autru pendre.
 ...ne s'et eutendre.
 ...a l'autru aocher.
 ...a l'autru trop dner.
 A uant p'rtire.



S apres fu p'mte conuortise.
 C'est celle qui les gens atise.
 Dependre r' de noient d'ner.
 E t les grans auons auer.
 E est cele qui fait a usure.
 P rester m'ams par la gut arduer.
 D auoir conquerer r' assembler.
 E est cele qui semont d'bler.
 I es l'arros r' les r'braud'aus.
 S i est g'ns p'ctes r' gut d'aus.
 D ue la fin m'ant en estoit pendre.
 E est celle qui l'autru fet pendre.
 P oter tolur r' tarter.

A ne autre p'mage pot atise.
 Tout encolte de conuortise.
 Au. ante estoit appellee.
 T ede estoit r' sale r' foulee.
 E ele p'mage est megre r' ceteue.
 E t aussi uert come une que.
 ant par estoit descouloire.
 D uel sembloit estre en l'angoire.
 E ule sembloit morte de fam.
 D uelquit seulement de p'm.
 F et de l'ellue fort r' angre.
 E t avec ce iert elle megre.
 E t hier trop pourenit uestue.
 E ore auoit uies r' d'rompue.

SARAH-GRACE HELLER

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MEDIEVAL FRANCE

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FASHION IN
MEDIEVAL FRANCE

Sarah-Grace Heller

D. S. BREWER

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For my parents, Tom and Mary Heller

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Introduction

Scholars, particularly in art and costume history, have argued and accepted that fashion was not really born before around 1350. Those who are familiar with the Old French literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries may find that astonishing, since very concise descriptions of fashionable clothing abound in that corpus. Take for instance an opening passage in one of the most famous and influential of thirteenth-century texts, Guillaume de Lorris' *Roman de la Rose* (c. 1225–40). The narrator-protagonist sets the scene in May. The earth and all the bushes are pleased to wear new clothes:

Avis m'iere qu'il estoit mais ...
el tens ou toute rien s'esgaie
que l'en ne voit buisson ne haie
qui en may parer ne se veille
et couvrir de novele fuelle.
Li bois recuevrent lor verdure,
qui sunt sec tant come yver dure;
la terre meïsmes s'orgueille
por la rosee qui la mueille,
et oublie la povreté
ou ele a tot l'iver esté;
lors devient la terre si gobe
qu'el velt avoir novele robe,
si set si cointe robe feire
que de colors i a .c. peire;
l'erbe et les flors blanches et perses
et de maintes colors diverses,
c'est la robe que je devise,
por quoi la terre mielz se prise.¹

It seems to me that it was May ...
That time when everything grows gay
because you see no bush nor hedge

¹ de Lorris and de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose* (lines 45, 49–66). Translations are my own throughout, except as noted. Dates of medieval works are rarely certain, and often extensively debated by scholars. Dates given in this book are nearly always approximations, relying either on the most recent scholarship or to the selective chronology in Krueger, *Cambridge Companion*.

that fails to put on fine array
 and clothe itself in new leaves.
 The recovering woods green out
 after being dry as long as winter lasts;
 Earth herself makes herself splendid
 blushing moistened by the dew,
 and forgets the poverty
 she dwelt in all winter long;
 This makes vain Earth swell up so proud,
 she wants to have a brand new gown.
 She is skilled at making stylish robes,
 because her palate has two hundred hues:
 the grass, and white and dark blue flowers,
 and blooms of many varied colors.
 Such is the robe that I describe
 in which the earth takes so much pride.

The topos of praising nature and spring in descriptions of the *locus amoenus* (pleasance) is a classical one, and the theme of the *reverdie* or the May-tide reclothing of the earth in green is commonplace in medieval lyric poetry.² What is remarkable in Guillaume de Lorris' version of the trope is Earth's pride in her splendor, and her skill in ordering new clothing, metaphors imposed on the natural cycle of spring from the register of a commercial economy where new clothes were exciting, prized, and where the stylish elite distinguished themselves by devising them according to their tastes and means.

As the dream tale continues, the narrator enters the spring day, preparing to enter the world (and fall in love) by dressing himself well, curiously sewing his sleeves in a zigzag stitch:

de mon lit tantost me levé,
 chauçai moi et mes mains lavé;
 lors trés une aiguille d'argent
 d'un aiguillier mignot et gent,
 si prins l'aiguille a enfiler.
 Hors de vile oi talent d'aler
 por oïr des oisiaus les sons,
 qui chantent desus les buissons
 en icele saison novele.
 Cousant mes manches a videle,
 m'an vois lors tot sol esbatant ...³

Straight away from bed I rose,
 I washed my hands, put on my *chausses*,⁴

² Curtius, *European Literature*, pp. 195–200; Schulze-Busacker, "Topoi", pp. 433–5.

³ de Lorris and de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, lines 89–99.

⁴ Old French terms indicating under-layers of clothing such as *chausses* (close-fitting leggings worn under robes primarily by men, of silk, wool, or leather), *braies* (undergarments

then drew out a silver needle,
 from a charming needle holder
 and set to drawing thread through its eye.
 I felt like going outside the walls
 to hear the song of birds, whose calls
 are heard above each bush and tree
 in this brand-new season.
 Sewing on my sleeves with zig-zag stitches,
 rejoicing, I set off alone ...

These details are worth remarking, first for their prominence at the very beginning of the work, and also for their emphasis on artifice. Spring does not wear a dress of light greens and fresh floral tones as one might expect, based on observations of nature. Her new gown contains hundreds of different colors but especially *pers* and in some manuscripts *inde*,⁵ dark shades of blue: prized, popular and costly dye colors in the thirteenth century. The lover-narrator does not describe himself as simply dressing, throwing on some clothes in the insouciant style one might expect from observing the habits of some young men. He specifies sewing his sleeves with a silver needle drawn from a handsome and stylish case, as well as the type of stitch he uses: an ostentatious zigzag, not a more modest lateral stitch as seen on some extant sculptures, nor something invisible, or quickly done in slap-dash slipstitches.⁶ The zigzag requires significant sartorial proficiency and ambidextrous ability, especially for a person sewing on a garment while wearing it.

In the Occitan romance known as *Flamenca* (c. 1260–80), the protagonist Guillaume dresses himself with noteworthy attention to sartorial detail after a dreamed meeting with the god of Love. So dressed, he gazes towards the tower where his beloved is imprisoned:

Em braias fon et en camisa;
 un mantel vert ap pena grisa
 a mes sot si a la fenestra.
 Li tor estai a la man destra.
 Tant cant si poinet a caussar
 no.l poc ges hom la tor emblar.
 Tot bellamen si vest e.s caussa,
 e non ac sabbata ni caus[s]a,
 mais us bels estivals biais

which could be roughly translated as breeches or drawers, of linen or hemp), and *chemises* (undershirts or slips, also of linen or hemp) have no exact modern equivalent, noted by I leave them untranslated to avoid confusion, and to emphasize their distinct styles.

⁵ Daniel Poirion's edition, which follows the Z manuscript family (base text B.N. fr. 25523, close to the earlier manuscript B.N. fr. 1559 of the late thirteenth century) reads "*D'erbes, de flors indes et perses*" for line 63. Poirion, *Le Roman de la Rose*.

⁶ Cf. the figures in Quicherat, *Histoire du costume*, pp. 185, 90. On the term "zig-zag", Langlois, "Vizele".

que foron fag ins a Doais;
caussas de sais non caussera
si ben hom tant non la[s] tirera.⁷

He was in *braies* and a chemise.
He placed a green cape lined in grey squirrel
under him on the window sill.
The tower was on the right-hand side.
As he worked to put on his *chausses*
he could not turn his gaze from the tower.
He dresses in elegant clothes and *chausses*:
he wore neither work shoes nor slippers,
but fine lightweight pointed boots
that had been made in Douai.
He would never wear a pair of silk *chausses*
unless no one could peel them off.

In his dressing Guillaume does not merely dress. The narrator makes it clear that he does not blunder indiscriminately into just any sort of trousers. His are distinctive leggings. They set him apart from all the other mediocre young lovers who would wear any breeches as long as they were of a rich fabric. Guillaume's *chausses* must fit him distinctively, displaying his individual body and all its virtues, even to the point where they hinder easy dressing by their tight fit, emphasized twice in the passage. His shoes, too, are distinctive. They are imported from a named merchant city, Douai, having the exotic effect of being a prestigious possession imported from the right place. His boots are not reputed for comfort, or one-size-fits-all (like slippers) or utilitarian (like *sabots* or heavy work shoes); rather, they are lightweight and carefully styled. He is portrayed as a man who can casually throw a rich fur-lined mantel of luxurious fabric over the windowsill. This portrait conveys that he has wealth: that much is incontestable. Sumptuous and fashionable are not necessarily synonyms, however. Does Guillaume not clearly have his own personal style here? He follows aristocratic modes of sumptuous dress in all respects, but what the author emphasizes is his distinctive interpretation of the standard elite model. The thirteenth-century ideal hero is repeatedly represented as an individual who strove for distinction in appearance. Is that not fashion?

The examples of fashion in noble male characters in thirteenth-century literature are numerous. Men, it should be noted, were at the forefront of consumption and display through the Middle Ages (and arguably up to the late eighteenth century), having primary control of finances and selection, contrary to the notion that ornament and shopping have ever been the exclusive domain of women. While the invectives of moralists and satirists are often directed at the vanity of women, this was often motivated by rhetorical tradition or competition for financial control, and can give a false impression of the degree to

⁷ Huchet, *Flamenca*, lines 2192–203.

which they were free to consume. With that caveat, women and people of lesser status such as the bourgeoisie or courtly companions, indeed whole towns, were engaged in the pursuit of the new, the stylish and the distinctive. This atmosphere of generalized desire for the new, perceptible in the passage quoted above from Guillaume de Lorris in which all the hedges and bushes wanted new clothes in keeping with the desires of the allegorized Springtime, finds an urban echo in Philippe de Remi's *Jehan et Blonde* (c. 1230–43). In honor of the initiation of the protagonist Jehan's rule as count, the entire town is dressed up, and its townspeople of all social stations with it, all taking a newfound pride in appearance:

Qui donques veïst desploïier
 Toiles de lin et couvrir rues
 Si dru que nus n'i voit les nues,
 Et es costés par les fenestres
 Pendre drap d'or et tant d'escarlate
 Qui ne sont pas fourré de nate,
 Mais de vair, de gris et d'ermine!
 Entour Dammartin n'eut mescine,
 Vallet ne bourgeois ne bourgoise
 A qui li quers mout ne renvoise
 Quant il voient tele leur vile:
 "Ceste feste n'est mie a guile",
 Font cil qui voient l'apparoil,
 Car mout erent en grant tooil
 Les jens Jehan d'apparillier⁸

Then anyone would see the displaying of
 lengths of linen, dressing up the streets,
 so many that no one could see the clouds;
 and hanging by the sides of the windows
 so much cloth of gold and scarlet woolens –
 not lined in matted furs,
 but in squirrel, miniver, and ermine!
 In Dammartin there was not a servant girl,
 a valet, a townsman nor a townswoman
 whose heart did not rejoice greatly
 when they saw their town so:
 "This celebration is no trick,"
 so say all who see the display,
 for it had been with great pains
 that Jehan's people had dressed up the town.

The hanging of cloth in the streets for a triumphal entry was both a common practice and a descriptive trope in the Middle Ages. In this particular text, the

⁸ Philippe de Remi, *Jehan et Blonde*, (lines 5644–59).

villagers collectively cover their buildings and streets with the same fine fabrics which they wear, the same types of fabrics which Jehan gives as gifts to two dozen new knights and to his family members, all now raised out of poverty by his triumphant adventures. They seek to improve their town using the same methods which people would use to show that their social status had improved: by showing off brightly dyed, fine-quality, expensive textiles. What is important in this particular example is the demonstration of how successful this improvement method is, emphasizing the admiration that the improved appearance solicits from all onlookers: their hearts were gladdened to see the splendor. Efforts to improve appearance receive positive attention. The romance supports the fantasy that novelty, unique style and ostentatious appearance will garner approval and increase an individual or group's social importance.

Beyond the narrative fantasies of romance, extant historical documents such as the French royal sumptuary laws promulgated in 1279 and 1294 testify to interest in new clothes and the status they imply on the part of many social groups. Men of wealth receive the greatest number of privileges in these attempts at regulating visual status according to income. In 1279, after attempting to limit the number of daily meals for noble men and clerics to three, the statutes address the number and cost of new fur-lined outfits ("pairs of robes", signifying the whole layered ensemble of *cote*, surcoat, and mantle/cape) such men would be allowed annually:

Il est ordené que nus ne dux, ne cuens, ne prelaz, ne bers, ne autres, soit clers soit lais, ne puisse faire ne avoir en un anz plus de iiij paires de robes vaires, ne dont l'aune de Paris conte plus de xxx s. de tournois, se il n'avoit plus de vij mile livrées de terre à tournois, et cil n'en pourrait avoir qu v au plus, et que nus escuiers, combien qu'il soit riche homs, ne face ne n'ait que ij paires de robes par an, se n'avoit iiij mile livrées de terre par an tournois ou plus, ou se il n'estoit fiuz de cel qui les eut, et cil ne puit avoir par an que iiij paire.

[It is ordered that no duke, count, prelate, baron or anyone else, whether cleric or layman, may have made or possess in a year more than four pairs of robes lined in vair fur, nor whose cloth costs more than 30 sous tournois, if he does not have more than seven thousand pounds tournois a year in rents, and if he does he may not have more than five; and that no squire, no matter how powerful a man he might be, may have made or possess more than two sets of robes per year, unless he has four thousand pounds tournois a year in rents or more, or unless he is the son of a man who does, and as such he may have no more than four sets.]⁹

However, companions, wives, clerics, and town dwellers are not neglected. The ostentatious materials they were consuming and the number of new outfits they wished to have per year are clearly a cause for concern. This concern would

⁹ Duplès-Augier, "Ordonnance somptuaire".

appear to be an increasing one, as the statutes of 1294 give this issue specific attention, forbidding *vair*, miniver, and ermine fur as well as gold, precious stones, crowns of silver and gold for the bourgeoisie. The finest furs were denied to clerics of lower status, except on their hats. Wives of noblemen of various levels of status were allowed as many outfits as their husbands in four different statutes. Another statute sets the limit at one new outfit a year for unmarried women, or noblewomen who are not chatelaines or in possession of two thousand pounds in rent a year. Compare these, however, to the eighteen statutes that concern men primarily or exclusively, or the six that treat gifts of clothing given to the companions or squires of noblemen and prelates. Men had more freedom to select, consume, and also decide what others would wear. Overall, these laws reveal shifts in fabric prices, income thresholds, and consciousness of the complex social ladder over the course of a quarter century, as well as desire on the part of many social groups to have more new changes of clothing in a year. They also speak of a social reality underlying the desires and fantasies represented in narrative works. Accelerating consumption was real, not a mere poet's dream. These regulations will be treated in further depth in Chapters 3 and 5.

The search for the ultimate in visible, social distinction, seen in sources from the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries in northern and southern France, is more important than it might initially appear. Since the period self-described as the Renaissance, the Middle Ages have often been presented as antithetical to all that is modern: an age of darkness, total lack of progress, and barbaric social practices. The Renaissance is reputed to be the age of the birth of the individual, the beginnings of modern science and of the vital world marketplace. The existence of fashion in thirteenth-century French literature undermines this notion of a clear watershed of cultural development. Attempts to gain social recognition – and even love – through public display of individual taste and refinement characterize the actions of many members of modern society. If such attempts also characterize thirteenth-century French society, some assumptions about the definitions and dating of “renaissances” and modernity deserve re-examination.

That descriptions of ideal clothing expressing degrees of uniqueness, personal distinction and attraction appear in vernacular romance books is not mere happenstance. Medieval fashion and written or poetic expression must be studied together because fashion and expression are intrinsically linked. This book argues that fashion is above all a conceptual system, not merely a visual one. No object is inherently fashionable. It does not have any value until declared desirable or useful in a social situation. Fashion is a result of a subjective, individual judgment, which must, paradoxically, be agreed upon by a group. It relies on communication for its existence. If a judgment is not communicated, the object remains only an object, never gaining (or losing) social importance and not realizing much, if any, of its potential role for symbolic communication in human relationships. The assertion that fashion and

expression must be studied together has important consequences. Some readers may be surprised to find that this is a book about fashion without pictures. But before simple items become items of fashionable consumption and imitation, they must be worked upon by the value-conferring power of words. Before something is fashionable, it must be desired, and that desire must be advertised to a group. Words are crucial evidence for locating the growth stages of a fashion system, and they will constitute the primary object of this study.

One of the first problems a study of fashion must confront is the staggering quantity of publication on the topic. Fashion has after all constituted its own genre of journalism for several centuries. Only in recent years have scholars taken it seriously as an object worthy of study. Previously, when fashion was discussed it often appeared as a by-product of investigation into some other problem. Moreover, when it has been addressed, disciplinary interests and methods have limited the questions writers have asked about the nature of fashion, and the sources at their disposal: sociologists have produced markedly different theories from psychologists, anthropologists, or novelists. Despite the many diverse contributions, a comprehensive working definition of fashion is still needed. This is the focus of Chapter 1, which proposes to develop a synthesis of fashion's mechanisms, adopting a rigorously interdisciplinary approach to arrive at something more holistic and widely applicable.

Fashion, while far from the mere frivolity which has characterized some analysis of it, is undeniably fickle, paradoxical, and complex. Formulating a working definition of what a fashion system is and how it functions presents many challenges, which this book attempts to resolve by describing a set of ten criteria for determining such a system's presence in a culture. Although these criteria are numbered for the sake of easy reference throughout the study, they should not be understood in a linear manner or as ranked in order of importance. They are rather a kind of matrix, each one related to several others. At times the presence of one criterion is highlighted, but if fashion plays a dominant role in a society, the criteria must implicitly be functioning together.

Chapter 1 will examine the rationale and contributing scholarship for each principle or criterion. Here they are, in brief:

- (1) A fashion system produces a relative disqualification of the past, due to a particular concept of time that privileges the new. In contrast would be a traditional society, where greater value is placed on the old and respected than on the new and innovative in various kinds of social problem-solving (everything from how to educate scholars to how to govern the *polis* to what to wear).
- (2) In a fashion system, there is society-wide desire for constant, systematic change, as opposed to a social system where change is sporadic and irregular.
- (3) Fashion represents a means of individual expression within a framework of social imitation.

- (4) In societies where fashion is present, consumption and appearance play a significant role in the emotions and the human subconscious. A fashionable society features an esthetic cult of the self, encouraging unique and distinctive consumption in the interest of developing one's confidence and increasing one's value in the eyes of others.
- (5) In a fashion system, change occurs in superficial forms rather than in major ones. The surface details of a relatively constant, slowly evolving silhouette are what are open to change and thus become outlets for self-expression through visible personal choice. Radical attempts to alter major silhouettes (for example changing a garment form, such as substituting men's trousers for skirts) are met with great resistance.
- (6) Fashion systems follow a theatrical logic of excess and exaggeration. Fashion is theatrical in that it necessarily involves conspicuous consumption. It is a performance, requiring an educated audience to be effective. The phrase "logic of excess and exaggeration" refers to how incremental changes in details accumulate, eventually developing a fashionable form to an extreme point at which time a dramatic switchback occurs. Trendsetters move either towards greater conservatism or towards greater audacity in order to preserve their distinction; less savvy imitators may exaggerate a fashion past the point of distinctive discretion to the point of appearing gauche, excessive, or awkward.
- (7) Words constitute the economy that gives and denies fashionable value to forms. In this way, fashion is performative, the result of the right person declaring something fashionable in the presence of the right audience. This point is important, because it dictates the need to study fashion through texts and words conveying fashionability and desire to consume, innovate, and express individual distinction.
- (8) In a fashion system, criticism is constantly aroused by the rejection of the past and the tendency for continual changes. Criticism and disapproval help to perpetuate the system by establishing an old view or product, or somehow a contrary one, against which to innovate and create something new.
- (9) A fashion system places value on pleasure, making seduction a social norm. Consumption of fashionable objects is seen as a means of gaining attention and approval, and from those things, pleasure.
- (10) Because a major goal in a fashion system is consumption at the greatest possible level, when such a system is established there is a gradual movement towards equalization of appearances and accessibility to all social groups. Fashion has frequently been called a democratizing force for this reason. Individual groups (groups based on socio-economics, profession, gender, race or ethnicity, and so on) create methods of maintaining distinction, but the possibility remains open for social mobility based on the ability to create objects worthy of consumption or based on the skillful manipulation of impressive appearances. By making all things

subject to change, a fashion system eventually destabilizes most sacred institutions, making them open to experimentation.

The opinion that fashion, as we now know it, did not exist before the fourteenth century, a view studied in Chapter 2, appears primarily in the work of scholars concentrating on visual evidence of the history of dress. While the contribution of these scholars is indisputably important, it risks misrepresenting many aspects of fashion history. For the thirteenth century, visual evidence is limited to cathedral sculptures, some funeral bronzes, and a moderate number of miniatures – fewer than in subsequent centuries when miniature painting and elaborate book production became more fully developed spheres of consumption. When images are few, rough, or decayed, visual scholars tend to find little fashion. From what images they have, they attempt to decide what was fashionable: pointed shoes, long sleeves, neckline brooches and so on. The problem is that fashion is not simply the sum of all the noticeable or representable objects. It is above all the desires that motivate the production, display and placement of those objects. A fashion system is never static: it is its nature to solicit constant change. Where there are static and rigid codes of appearance which censor visual display, it is not present as the defining, shaping force it has come to be in many urbanized areas of the West. To study fashion's presence we must look beyond visual images to expressions of desire for distinction, uniqueness and admiration.

The notion that words constitute the economy of fashion (criterion 7) dictates in different ways the approaches of several of the book's later chapters, which study specific aspects of emerging French fashion system over the "long" thirteenth century (c. 1160–1330). Chapter 3 explores expressions of the desire for novelty (criteria 1 and 2) in vernacular narratives, looking at occasions when characters get new clothes and how they are described as attempting to create unique appearances (criteria 3, 4 and 5) and impress others by so doing (criteria 6 and 9). Chapter 4 studies the role words play in a fashion system from a philological standpoint, examining a set of Old French and Occitan words related to *cointerie*, describing stylish, elegant, desirable objects and behavior, which have not previously been recognized as linked to the semantics of fashion. This section obviously focuses on criterion 7, but also touches on criteria 3 and 4, examining how *cointerie* signals personal and social distinction; on criterion 6, as lovers stage themselves for public approval; on criterion 9, as the term is linked to sexual appeal; and on criterion 8, looking at how fashion arouses anxiety and criticism. After establishing that most of the criteria are in play in French urban society in this period, the book turns to some of the sociological mechanisms involved in the development of the nascent fashion system. Chapter 5 examines representations of the need for personal spending money in vernacular texts, essential for making distinctive individual choices in display, something that is impossible when a gift system is dominant or when coin is too scarce to allow for shopping. This section enters into analysis of criterion 10 to some degree, looking at how access to fashionable distinction

is opened up to groups beyond the highest elite. Shopping is the topic of Chapter 6, which studies representations of how new things were obtained and whether individual choices (criteria 3, 4 and 5) could be expressed in those transactions, looking at the roles played by different members of the social hierarchy. It also looks at how shopping began to occur in different geographies such as noble manors or emerging commercial cities such as Paris. Moving beyond these relatively abstract studies of the desires for consumption expressed in texts, Chapter 7 turns to look at the specific materials and styles characteristic of the thirteenth-century look, which has been dismissed as simple, undeveloped, and unisex by some, celebrated as elegant by others. This last chapter briefly surveys how newly available and more abundant materials were employed to create an attention-getting profile.

International trade and the desire for the exotic are clearly key aspects of fashion, so an apology is due for limiting this book's scope to a case study of nascent fashion in France. It is worth remarking that the French have arguably seen fashion as worthy of serious inquiry longer than have the scholars of other national traditions, and indeed seem to have long been significantly self-conscious about a national preoccupation with fashion.¹⁰ The importance of fashion to French cultural identity can, for instance, be observed in Montaigne's remark that he would excuse "in our people" the fault of not having anything better to do than perfecting their own manners and customs, since that is "a universal vice", but he had to complain about the particularly French "indiscretion" of constantly changing opinions about clothing,¹¹ or in the eighteenth-century *Dictionnaire sentencieux*, which defined fashion as "ways of dressing, writing and behaving which make the French twist round and round in a thousand different ways to make themselves out more gracious, more charming and often more ridiculous."¹² Suggesting a crucial link between writing and the mentality of fashionable consumption, some of the earliest – and some of the most lucid – theories of fashion have emerged from what we would now consider the literary realm, although these contributions are not often recognized by fashion historians. Honoré de Balzac sought to describe

¹⁰ When Herbert Blumer issued his "invitation to sociologists to take seriously the topic of fashion", his bibliography was slim, limited only to English-language works. Blumer, "Fashion". Sima Godfrey contrasted the intricate association "if not collusion" of "the heady world of French letters and the bodily world of fashion" with the Anglo-American perspective, which lacks such a close association. She suggested that it is easy for a "familiar sort of puritanical discourse" to condemn both fashion itself and Gallic critical theory as trivial and passing, "mere fashion." She offered a different argument, one which is really a call for study: "it is not that the French read their letters lightly – *loin de là* – but that they read their fashion, and have consistently done so in modern times, seriously." See Godfrey, 'Fashion and Fashionability', p.12. See also Wells, "Of Critics and the Catwalk", p.72. On fashion still making many American academics uncomfortable, see Steele, "The F-word". Sumner, *Folkways*, pp.184–5.

¹¹ Montaigne, *Les Essais*, 1. 329.

¹² Caraccioli, *Dictionnaire critique*, s.v. "mode".

the life of leisure in his *Traité de la vie élégante*,¹³ calling “la fashion” a necessary ingredient in the life of “l’homme qui ne fait rien.” The poet and art critic Charles Baudelaire defined fashion in the course of defining beauty and modernity in his essays on Constantin Guys, promoting this little-known artist by describing how he captured the “spirit of modern life.”¹⁴ While the tradition of French authors theorizing fashion has particularly flourished since the nineteenth century,¹⁵ it also includes such earlier figures as Montaigne and, as this book argues, even medieval French writers such as Guillaume de Lorris.

While certain French fashions have indisputably reigned supreme in the West, in the thirteenth century and at other times, it is readily clear that cultural hegemony does constantly shift, particularly where fashion is concerned, and that France is certainly not Europe’s only fashion capital. Italy’s role in the development of European fashion can hardly be denied.¹⁶ Italians such as Dante would contest France’s cultural hegemony in later generations,¹⁷ and Milan’s runways now compete with those of Paris. The evidence of consumption found in sumptuary laws began to appear in France and Italy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (the first extant law is from Genoa in 1157), spreading through much of the rest of Europe thereafter.¹⁸ Joachim Bumke has described the influence that French fashions in clothing, armor, and courtly literature had on German practices, estimating that this influence was most marked in the years between 1170 and 1220, but extended from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, arousing the contempt of moralists.¹⁹ Surrounding regions such as England, Burgundy, and Flanders also both imitated and outpaced the French at various points in the Middle Ages and later. Ultimately, France can still be considered the defending fashion capital over the centuries. Antoine Furetière illustrated this long-held position in his 1690 *Dictionnaire universel*, in his definition of the word *Mode*: “Said particularly of the manner of dressing following the customs of the Court. The French are constantly changing fashion. Foreigners follow the French fashions, except for the Spanish, who never change fashions.”²⁰

Francocentrism is peculiarly common even among modern French theorists, in contrast with the generalizing tendency common in Anglophone and other scholarship. For instance, Claude Javeau’s reasoning that sociological research on fashion was important rested on its illumination of many aspects of French

¹³ Balzac, “*Traité de la vie élégante*”, pp. 211–57.

¹⁴ Baudelaire, *Peintre de la vie moderne*.

¹⁵ See Fortassier, *Les écrivains français et la mode*, pp. 43–57.

¹⁶ Placing the birth of Italian fashion ahead of that of France, Steele, *Paris Fashion*, pp. 17–18.

¹⁷ Brownlee, “The Practice of Cultural Authority”, pp. 258–69.

¹⁸ Heller, “Sumptuary Legislation”, pp. 121–36; Killerby, *Sumptuary Law in Italy*, pp. 23–6.

¹⁹ Bumke, *Courtly Culture*, pp. 79–82.

²⁰ Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, s.v. “Mode.”

culture.²¹ Pierre Bourdieu, in the preface to the English version of *Distinction*, apologized for the “Frenchness” of the book, referring to both its methodology and its empirical object, the Parisian *haute bourgeoisie* which, having directly inherited the habits of the Ancien Régime court society, had no counterparts elsewhere “at least for the arrogance of its cultural judgments.”²² Examining the mechanisms of distinction in France, both in medieval court cultures and among the early bourgeoisie, has importance for understanding the evolution of the Western fashion system. For all that other peoples have imitated the French, the French themselves have long imported materials and amalgamated styles from other European capitals and more distant parts of the world.

This book, then, directs its queries towards the written record, asking: did fashion exist in the French Middle Ages?

To answer that question, it begins with another: what is fashion?

²¹ “Le vêtement joue dans notre culture un rôle capital. Un grand nombre d’éléments de notre mode (m.) de vie s’ordonnent autour du vêtement et des changements qui lui impose la mode (f.)” Javeau, “Quelques réflexions”, p.250.

²² Bourdieu, *Distinction*, pp. xi–xiii.

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