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Clothes Make the (Wo)Man: Interpreting Evidence of the Secondhand Clothing Trade in Late Medieval England

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Introduction

Second-hand objects are a complex raw material. On the one hand, the objects and clothing are anonymous and, on the other, they carry the mark and memory of those who used or wore them, of the societies that created them, of the events they have witnessed. They thus lie somewhere between anonymity, souvenir and fetish.

— Laurence Fontaine, *Alternative Exchanges: Second-Hand Circulations from the Sixteenth Century to the Present*

Affectionately known as “thrifting,” the secondhand clothing trade has become a wildly popular mode of fashion in our modern day and age. However, the concept of thrifting has its roots in the fashion economy as early as the twelfth century in England. In its nascent stage, the secondhand clothing trade resembled the practice of hand-me-downs more closely than thrifting. The gifting and refashioning of old clothes is part of the circulating gift exchange that dates back well before the fourteenth century in the form of handing down clothing in wills and testaments. The secondhand clothing trade expanded beyond passing down clothing; instead of circulating clothing among personal relations, people began circulating clothing into a public market of buyers who had the demand and desire for fashionable clothes on the cheap. As the epigraph by Fontaine hints, the donning of secondhand clothing is a complex topic, one that conjoins economic and social history to fashion history.

When the dominant masculine narrative of history is disrupted, it becomes clear that fashion deserves a place in the history of economics.¹ A look at prominent works of economic English history will reveal works by men,² who approach the study of clothing in an economic context through the function of textiles in England’s economic history.³ A large part of England’s early economy was based on the woolen textile trade, which in turn relied on the agricultural economy. This deep connection makes the lack of textile and clothing history in the economic history of England especially questionable, particularly since clothing was entirely handmade and all households participated in the making of

garments. To begin to access the time period that I am examining (post-plague England, c. 1349-1500), and the intersection of fashion and the changing social structure of England after 1349, I targeted the few sources that address the problem of the plague in conjuncture with economic history (Hatcher, Thrupp 101-19). This paper explores the nature of secondhand clothing with reference to the intersection of supply and demand in a period where there was a rising surplus of wealth, more cash in the hands of more people, and an increase in unclaimed clothes left behind by those killed by the Black Death.

Although this paper explores the economic aspect of all the occurrences that coincided to create this unique event in time, it is more accurate to label this paper a history of the mundane. Economic histories have primarily focused on the financial interactions of the wealthy, international shipments of goods, and other grandiose transactions. However, this topic requires that we reach down to the classes who were able to access commercial material goods and experience materialism for the first time. Since this topic largely deals with those who are historically neglected and considered the “little people,” when considered at all, I embrace the label “mundane.” Topics centering around domesticity and other feminine realms have been rapidly garnering attention in the past decades, and prove to be fascinating areas of history.

Methods

However, the scarcity of sources on the topic of secondhand clothes necessitates somewhat finicky research methods. Since very few scholars examine the late medieval English secondhand clothing trade, locating what scholarship does exist provided guidelines for the types of primary sources necessary to advance the research. Locating primary sources proved exceptionally challenging. Firstly, the time period I am examining (c. 1349–1500) puts researchers of the period at a distinct disadvantage simply due to the fragility of textile artifacts, and therefore the natural degradation of documents that would aid in my research. If any existed previously, they have been rendered unusable or otherwise lost. Secondly, written records on the clothing trade are simply not there, for reasons that I will delve into soon. Thirdly, if direct evidence of the secondhand clothing trade in late medieval England does survive in a legible or recognizable form, it has not been made available via print or digital publication. One source that I suspect would help reveal information on the secondhand clothing trade would be in law court records, which are unfortunately currently purely archival. Working without access to archives is a challenge to the undergraduate researcher. However, what I unearthed has proven important and relevant. What has not turned up is almost as interesting as what has, and the historical implications of this are fascinating.

Most of what the internet offers as digital artifacts concerning clothing and its sales from 1349–1520 are documents concerning professional, formal, and regulated sectors of the market. Within these categories exist documentation of types of craftsmen in local areas, lists of wages, prices, guild agreements, etc. Unfortunately, the secondhand trade had no guilds to speak of. The secondhand clothing trade was the reverse of these documented trades: casual, informal, and unregulated. Much of my research and analysis of this time period and its consequences have been completed without direct commentary from primary or secondary sources, but rather have been done through “sideways” examination of evidence and documentation. After months of research I gleaned three sources. The first is a legislative source, a statute from the Rolls of Parliament (October 1363) that implements sumptuary legislation. The second is the last will and testament (c. 1439-1440) of Isabel le Despenser, Countess of Warwick. The third is a bit of doggerel verse, “London Lickpenny,” a ditty by an unknown author presumed to be the poet and monk, John Lydgate (c. 1370–c. 1451). Each of these shed light on actual practices of the secondhand clothing trade. However, each has drawbacks.

The statute from the Rolls of Parliament is a legal document setting out ideals for societal reform but it does not state what is happening in the society, leaving the question of “why” unspecified. Still, it has been immensely useful in discerning what problems have risen around the sartorial markets and the use of clothing in a social context during the time period. The will of Isabel le Despenser (c. 1439–1440) is a fairly standard list of items bequeathed, in this case primarily to the Church. A headdress is just one of many sartorial items to appear in her will. Her headdress stands out as the only non-jewelry accessory, and it is clear that it is intended for resale. The verse recalls a man’s trying journey in London from the mid-1400s. The man loses his hood (presumably from his cloak) and later discovers it being sold at a market in Cornhill, but cannot afford to buy it back (Lydgate). Verses such as this were commonly known and spread widely, and thus are valuable sources for defining attitudes toward second-hand clothing.

An example of this “sideways” examination can be seen in my work with feminist economic history and the role women have had in the functioning of the secondhand clothing market. While gathering sources, I noticed a distinct lack of feminist scholars of English economic history, with certain notable exceptions (Power and Postan). The remarkable absence of feminist economic historians is, in my experience, a deprivation to the study of history. While feminist scholars such as Barbara Hanawalt and Judith Bennett study medieval peasantry and women’s lives and livelihoods, more often than not these topics focus on household economies and any circumstantial outpouring of

household work into the mainstream market, rather than a tight examination of women in the medieval public market (Bennet and Karras; Hanawalt).

Reasons for a Medieval Secondhand Clothing Trade

Before diving into the secondhand clothing market, it is useful to consider why a secondhand market was desirable. In order for a market to develop, there must be a demand for the service. A part of the demand may have derived from a lower-class anxiety to assume the appearance of a higher class, and this might have prompted them to obtain clothes of a certain quality and to present as higher class. In addition to an underlying class anxiety that created a demand for secondhand clothes, there is also an unexplored psychological element in the wearing of another person's clothing and the assumption of a new identity through their outward presentation.

One such source of anxiety and psychological stress may stem from having to pretend to be of a higher class by purchasing used clothes through a cheap and possibly underground source, as well as an added stress of the fear of being caught "dressing up." The question of psychological impact on the lower classes in their struggle to assume a new identity is one that has not, to my knowledge, been addressed. Additionally, the question of an impact on the psyche of lower classes feeling pressure to rise in station has similarly been neglected.

Answers to the evolution of a secondhand market lie not only in various interrelated theories, but also in an examination of the longer history surrounding the plague and its after-effects. Finding out how the secondhand market evolved and the pathways it took to evolve will begin to help explain the circumstance of the market and what prompted its rise in post-plague England. Is it possible that after society got back on track, class and fashion began to matter again? Or did post-plague England transcend previous societal beliefs and begin a new cultural movement in which social status gained unprecedented importance? Did the secondhand market evolve after the plague simply because looters were more prevalent and found a surplus of clothing that no one was using anymore? The use of historical theory, including economic, feminist, and cultural theory, allows for many gateways in, but ultimately generates more questions than answers.

As fashion was evolving and the social situation in England was changing alongside it, the rising middling class needed to keep up with fashions to be able to participate in newly-accessible upper-class activities. Despite having newfound wealth, it is plausible that these middling people would not have been able to afford the tailors of the elites, nor would they necessarily have the skill to create these more complex fashions at home, as was possible with past fashions.⁴

Although the creation of the secondhand trade is a remarkable event in socioeconomic history, the wearing of used clothing was not unusual in medieval England. My interests lie in the development and purpose of the secondhand market, including the gender implications of the secondhand trade and the cultural and personal effects of adopting secondhand clothing from strangers. Economic theory is vital to gaining an understanding of the history and background of the secondhand market, and to begin to question why a secondhand market developed in the first place. For example, the ability to purchase clothes pre-made, even if they were pre-owned, would have taken some amount of excess wealth. With a little extra money, the lower or middling classes would not have been able to invest in tailored clothes, but may have had enough to not have to make their own clothing. Looking at the situation through a historical economic lens is necessary to find out what was happening in the economy of medieval England that created a cash flow in the lower social strata.

Economics plays an important role in examining the sale of secondhand clothing since a secondhand market marks the transition from used clothing as part of a gift economy into used clothing as part of a commercial economy. In the gift economy, clothing was passed down in wills and testaments between friends and family members for sentimental and status purposes, and supposedly was worn by the receiver (Sylvester, Chambers, and Owen-Crocker 10). These garments could be reworked and manipulated to suit the new owner (whether they were altered for fit or for style), and effectively incorporated into the owner's wardrobe (Burkholder 139). This passing down of clothing is fraught with meaning: a symbol of sustaining status, an act of affection, or a plea from the testator to not be forgotten. Willing clothing after death exemplifies that the actual wearing or possession of used clothing was not radical. Instead, it is the manner in which these used clothes were procured and how the garments took on new meaning that continue to pose problems for scholars of medieval England.

Literature Review: What We Know About Secondhand Clothing in Medieval England

Of the books that discuss general life in the medieval age of Europe and England, many contain only passing mention of a secondhand clothing trade, a used clothing market, or a pawn business that deals in clothing. Although usually no more than a couple of lines are devoted to the topic of secondhand clothing, the inclusion of this information indicates that the existence of a secondhand clothing market is a commonly accepted fact in academic and popular history. Although these mentions are exciting and serve to confirm

the existence of a trade which is scarce in primary documents, the question still arises: where does the secondhand clothing trade come from?

There is underwhelming primary evidence for these types of markets, aside from brief, singular mentions. Existing scholarship on the topic of secondhand markets (not secondhand clothing specifically) is largely limited to Beverly Lemire, Kate Kelsey Staples, and James Davis. Lemire is an excellent source for exploring the secondhand clothing market in England, but unfortunately was an unusable source for me as she tends to work with the early modern period beginning in the 1600s. Staples' work provided a wonderful basis for my work concerning the existence of a secondhand clothing trade. Her work guided me to the place and time of my research, leading me to center on London after 1350. James Davis's work centers on the economic aspect of the secondhand market and the methods of sale, and although Davis is not focused on the sales of whole garments, his work was very useful for my examination of the economics of the secondhand market and its practical workings.

Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass offer an intriguing insight: "The value of clothes, then, [was] on one hand, they materialized social status and indebtedness; on the other, they were circulating commodities" (Jones and Stallybrass 11). The wealthy may have willed clothes to one another in a show of social standing. During the later part of the medieval period, these same higher classes began to fear the advancement—or even the appearance of advancement—of the lower classes. To the nobles' horror and the commoners' delight, "clothes are detachable . . . they can move from body to body. That is precisely their danger and their value: they are bearers of identity, ritual, and social memory"(Jones and Stallybrass 5). The importance of secondhand clothes in the study of higher-class emulation during the medieval period is highlighted by Burns' observation that "consumer goods . . . can be 'resocialized'" (Burns 4).

There is a distinct lack of research done on the field of secondhand goods in medieval England, largely because the secondhand market operated outside of the regulated market and thus left very little evidence for historians to use. The secondhand trade primarily targeted the lower classes, but offered promise to those who aspired to a higher class (Davis 270). Davis proposes that the secondhand trade operated largely in "'hidden' or informal market sites," perhaps hinting at a silent economy comprised of women (Davis 271). Staples echoes Davis's suggestion that the secondhand trade was dominated by women, briefly expressing interest in "the extent to which [the secondhand trade] was a woman's trade" (Staples 300).

Luckily for historians, Staples speaks to the fact that "tracing girdles through debt cases and in inventories, clothing as gifts . . . could shed light on the flow of secondhand items in the marketplace and might also provide an access point for understanding the value of these sartorial and domestic items"

(Staples 303). It is logical to query the source of clothes for the secondhand trade, and luckily Staples and Davis both investigate this issue. While Staples names items taken from debt, Davis names three specific sources of secondhand clothing: “craftsmen...who had a supply of wasted, old and substandard material,” “aristocratic and ecclesiastical institutions,” and upper class people who used pawnbrokers to release commodities into the secondhand market (Davis 276).

Davis provides an example of goods released to a pawnbroker from an aristocratic household: “in 1432–1433, Dame Alianor Hilton pawned her velvet and damask gowns furred with marten for £12”; Davis hypothesizes that poorer people, such as peasants, may also have utilized pawnbrokers to get cash to pay off debts or make payments (Davis 276). Davis names an additional source that put luxury goods into the market, the “disposal of goods after inheritance” (Davis 277). By releasing pre-owned and worn clothes into the secondhand market, the lower classes emulated higher social standing in ways more complicated than simply wearing clothes above their stations. By wearing pre-owned clothing, the wearer takes on the memory and meaning that the discarded clothes of the higher classes evoke.

Wearing pre-owned clothing amplifies emulation; it is an attempt to literally fill the shoes of a higher class. In order to see the more human reasons for causal patterns and changes in the emergence of a secondhand market, it is important to examine the patterns of human behavior that prompted the need for secondhand clothing. These patterns include both the rising importance of fashion and the changing significance of clothing for those in lower classes, as inferred from sumptuary legislation that tells us the lower class was the main consumer group for secondhand clothing (Ormrod). Focusing on post-plague England, it is important to examine possible societal changes that may have prompted commoners to place new emphasis on appearances and “social climbing.”

Feminist theory is vital to any discussion of textiles and fashion because these topics are so often coded as feminine. However, men were not impervious to fashion trends, and the entire concept of fashion arguably began with men, although this idea can be lost in the medieval setting when sumptuary laws were often directed towards a growing variety of garments in women’s fashions. The discussion of who ran secondhand trades of all kinds is a controversial one; scholars such as Staples and Davis contest that women were the driving force behind the secondhand market. This theory is intriguing for many reasons, but most importantly because secondhand markets were often suppressed or acted against by authorities due to the threat they posed to guild profits and activity.

Investigation of the Primary Sources: Frippery and Social Climbing

The possibility of a secondhand trade is evident in sumptuary legislation from the Rolls of Parliament in October of 1363 (Ormrod). Sumptuary legislation from that period indicates that one impact of the plague, spreading wealth among the lower classes, caused unease among the wealthy. This effect was considered disruptive and subversive enough for authorities to put forward an act that restricted “liberties being taken with appearances.” Furthermore, the social signifiers associated with clothing betray an upheaval of class presentation and patterns of consumer behavior (Sylvester et al. 200–202). Edward III’s legislation enacted a hierarchy of appearances that put restrictions on the clothing allowed for different social ranks. These pieces of sumptuary legislation are extremely valuable for modern-day scholars because the legislation lists social ranks that lay outside of the realm of the elite and otherwise may not appear in surviving documents. Along with the listing of varying social ranks, a variety of garments are listed that are associated with those particular ranks (Sylvester et al. 202).

A hint of what prompted sumptuary legislation appears within the opening paragraph of the act itself:

Also, the commons declare: that whereas the prices of various victuals within the realm are greatly increased because various people of various conditions wear various apparel not appropriate to their estate . . . Thus the aforesaid merchandises are at a much greater price than they should be, and the treasure of land is destroyed to the great damage of the lords and the commonality. Wherefore they pray remedy, if it the opinion of the lords of the council.

Answer. As regards the petition put forward by the commons concerning the excess of dress of people beyond their estate, to the very great destruction and impoverishment of the land, for which reason all the wealth of the realm is on the point of being consumed and destroyed, it is ordained in the manner that follows (Ormrod).

The opening passage reveals the main motivation behind the implementation of sumptuary laws: social climbers were causing moral degradation and their spending habits were inflating the costs of material items. The Rolls of Parliament address those who don clothing to socially climb by gaining the appearance of a higher status. It can be assumed that one way these “social climbers” obtained high-status clothes could have been through the secondhand trade.

However, we have no record of actual transactions within the secondhand trade to confirm this claim, likely because these transactions would have been small-scale and local. The longevity and even the creation of documents depended on a couple of different aspects of the subject’s identity, such as

wealth, proximity to the king, gender, and location (for trade records, this depended on location in terms of local, regional, or international trade). The sumptuary legislation in the Rolls of Parliament also complains that “grooms wear the apparel of craftsman, and craftsman wear the apparel of gentlemen, and gentlemen wear the apparel of esquires” (Ormrod). This detail provides context and examples of what was happening to cause the implementation of the sumptuary legislation, but does not address how this was practically accomplished.

This leaves us to presume that some of these socially upscale items were being procured through nontraditional venues, such as the secondhand market. The foregoing passage emphasizes the main motivation behind the implementation of sumptuary laws: social climbers causing moral degradation and their spending habits inflating the costs of sartorial items. From these items, two problems are clear. First, that a middling class of people was emerging in English society in the years following the end of the Black Death in 1349 and was attempting social mobility by making motions to rise in society through the symbolic donning of clothing. Second, that this middling class was beginning to afford and purchase the produce of mainstream textile workers who traditionally worked for the elite classes.

With these two problems in mind, it is clear that the emerging middling ranks were not afraid to show their uptick in wealth (Britnell 165). This new influx of wealth is not surprising: people providing services that had become scarce during the plague demanded wage increase, and the resulting rise in wages was so massive that it caused inflation throughout the English economy. The prices of goods increased to such an extent that Edward III attempted to control the spike in wages by enacting the Ordinance of Labourers during the Black Death in 1349. This ordinance ultimately failed and laboring wages continued to grow (“Ordinance of Labourers, 1349”). The rise in wages allowed laborers to accrue wealth and eventually gain social standing after the plague had passed. The analysis of the act of sumptuary legislation in the Rolls of Parliament implies that product inflation caused a cascade of effects: the wage increases in 1349 were still impacting the English economy, the blame for this was pinned on the middling classes who had gained wealth during the labor shortage, and the middling class was apparently spending a portion of its new wealth on sartorial goods.

This affects the study of secondhand clothing in two ways. First, these middling people were beginning to move upward in society through very public means—through appearances and spending habits. This appears to be an immediate reaction to the post-plague climate in England in which the reduced population freed up space for social movement from the lower ranks upward. Second, it reveals that these middling classes were wealthy

enough to begin to afford sartorial services traditionally only afforded by elites, which caused price inflation for these services. This means that although the middling classes were moving to a point where they could afford mainstream market services, there was still a group of people who needed the services provided by the secondhand clothing trade. This group would have previously belonged to the lower classes and then acquired enough wealth to attempt to appear of a higher social rank. Yet, this group would still not have enough money to purchase sartorial goods from the main market, but rather would purchase pre-made clothing from the secondhand clothing dealers, called fripperers.

One document that provides a clearer example of the existence and impact of the secondhand clothing trade is the will of Isabel le Despenser, Countess of Warwick. A portion of her will dictates that her “great head-dress with the rubies be sold for the highest price and delivered to the said abbot and the house of Tewkesbury so that they will not complain about my burial . . . Also I wish all my jewels and pearls to be sold to fulfill the terms of my will” (Sylvester et al. 52). Her wish to have her headdress sold to offset burial costs implies that the headdress will be sold to a pawnbroker or a secondhand vendor. Although it is possible that the headdress was intended to be broken down and separated into metal, gems, and fabric, it is peculiar that she would then specify that the headdress be sold separately from her jewels and pearls. Then, too, other questions arise: who would physically sell the headdress to the buyer? Would it be a trusted member of the Countess’s household? To whom, specifically was the headdress was sold, and for what price? Did the profit covered the burial costs? What happened to the headdress after it was procured by a pawnbroker or other seller? Records that would give answers to such questions are simply inaccessible to me at this point in time.

“London Lickpenny,” a ditty purportedly written by John Lydgate (c. 1370–c. 1451), recalls the tale of a man who loses his hood (presumably from his cloak), later discovers it being sold at a market in Cornhill, but then cannot afford to buy it back: “Then into Corn-Hyll anon I yode,/Where was mutch stolen gere amonge;/I saw where honge myne owne hoode,/That I had lost amonge the thronge;/To by my own hood I thought it wronge,/I knew it well as I dyd my crede,/ But for lack of mony I could not spede” (Lydgate). The mention of the hood being discovered during the man’s unfortunate journey promises to reveal some details of the secondhand trade, in London specifically. In the ditty, the man tours around London’s various neighborhoods and recounts the name of the district and the goods that were being hawked there. The verse names Cornhill a thriving community of secondhand traders in medieval urban London, as the place where the hood was taken for resale. Staples also gives evidence that fripperers were associated with Cornhill in their wills (Staples 151–171).

This distinction between the market districts and their wares is intriguing, indicating a marked territory of specific occupations within certain areas. The ditty differentiates the drapers and hawkers of textiles, which were “the fynest in the land,” from the secondhand vendors (Lydgate). The drapers, who belonged to an established guild, were separate from those who, without a group name, hawked fine cloth in Cheapside. These cloth vendors were separated from those in Cornhill, where stolen gear was resold. Lydgate’s careful geographic differentiation among textile vendors suggests that medieval reactions to the secondhand clothing trade may have been similar to the modern-day disdain for the phrase “used clothing.” Furthermore, it seems that different branches of the textile trade were divided to keep guild activity and non-guild activity, such as secondhand clothing vendors, separated. Along with hints of the politics of the textile trade, “London Lickpenny” ultimately reinforces the possibility that stolen goods infiltrated secondhand markets.

Tentative Conclusions: the Post-Plague Economic Landscape and the Gendered Market

Given the apparent lack of prestige, authority endorsement, or regulation in the secondhand market, it is not surprising that no quantification of secondhand clothing transactions remain. Unfortunately for this project, and the study of history at large, the lack of formal evidence of transactions within the secondhand market limits our understanding of the workings and functions of the secondhand trade in medieval England. However, this lack of evidence, which is typical of alternative market activity, is evidence in itself. Considering circumstances that would affect the lifestyle of a medieval person, such as variables of wealth, proximity to the king, gender, and location, some assumptions can be made about the secondhand market and its purveyors. First, it can be assumed that people of substantial wealth, such as well-established merchants, did not conduct the secondhand trade. Staples notes that frippery, or the selling of used clothing, was a side occupation for many vendors rather than their main profession (Staples 168–169). The undertaking of two jobs indicates that fripperers likely did not hold lucrative occupations as their primary profession. This assumption leads to another: that these clothing vendors were not associated with the Crown, which implies that they were of a lower status, and thus were not keeping the scrupulous records common among higher-ranking merchants. Third, many vendors of secondhand clothing may have been women.

Economic historian Richard H. Britnell notes that after the Black Death women had better employment prospects simply due to the scarcity of labor available. These women often did not specialize in a single occupation the way

that men did, but rather became “jacks-of-all-trades” (Britnell 165). Staples’ article “Fripperers in Late Medieval London” indicates that frippery existed in the medieval London market as a side business for some and a primary occupation for others (Staples 168). Staples also notes that frippery may have appealed to women in particular; this suggestion is based on quantitative data from other medieval scholars who have examined women’s roles in cloth trades around Europe prior to the sixteenth century (Staples 168–169). Additionally, evidence from Britnell supports the involvement of women in the secondhand clothing trade, as he notes that “opportunities for female employment were better after the Black Death as a result of the general scarcity of labour . . . [and] women were less likely than men to be specialized in a single occupation”(Britnell 165).

Given both Britnell’s statement that women were more likely to be involved in multiple trades and Staples’ evidence that frippery was a side business for some families, it is reasonable to assume that women made up at least some of the population of fripperers. If this is true, and if women were only beginning to be a larger part of the work force after the Black Death, it makes sense that women’s work was not being regularly documented. Finally, lack of documentation may be due to location. Since most documents concerning trade came from regional and international interactions, largely from guilds, it can be assumed that the secondhand market did not operate internationally or even regionally, but instead was a purely local transaction.

The unfortunate lack of documentation for the secondhand clothing trade puts historians of the mundane at a distinct disadvantage. However, the unglamorous everyday life is every bit as rich in historical significance as military and political events—perhaps even more so. In the past, historians have routinely put clothes and fashion on the back burner, and only recently has fashion been acknowledged (at times begrudgingly) as an integral part of history. The study of cultural and economic history benefits greatly from the recognition of clothing as an important aspect of history. The particular importance of secondhand clothing is that it documents the massive change in social structure that occurred in England after the Black Death. However, examining the secondhand trade proves to be a difficult task given the scarcity of sources available to contemporary scholars.

There are many holes in the story of secondhand clothing in medieval England waiting to be researched. Some knowledge may simply be inaccessible because of the lack of evidence or the natural degradation of material history. Topics that will enrich the study of the secondhand clothing trade include thievery and research on the fates of stolen items in the Middle Ages. Pawning items was not unusual during the late medieval period, and

examining records kept by pawnbrokers would also benefit this study (Sylvester et al. 52). To better understand both how the secondhand market operated and what was being bought and sold through the market, it is necessary to examine how clothing was released into the trade.

The topic of goods introduced to the secondhand market has been partially examined by Davis but needs a more thorough tracking of materials, although the scarcity of records from the late medieval period may prevent this. Nevertheless, it is reasonably safe to assume that these transactions were taking place and impacting lives. The wearing of purchased secondhand clothes (as opposed to the clothes which would have been distributed through the preexisting circulating gift economy) would have been new to the medieval English, and makes for an intriguing study of the cultural and social impact of fashion.

The complexities of donning secondhand materials are difficult to fully articulate and comprehend. Fontaine, who is quoted in the epigraph that prefaced this paper, begins to express the difficulties of speaking about secondhand clothing as symbols, noting that they “lie somewhere between anonymity, souvenir and fetish” (Fontaine 9). Breaking his categories down, the idea of anonymity is especially relevant in the discussion of secondhand clothing. Articles of secondhand clothing began their lives in the hands of those whose existence matched the symbolic meaning of the garment in terms of gender, age, social status, and personal taste, as well as through physical traits such as height and weight. However, as the garments move out of their original owner’s hands and into their second owner’s possession, the garment becomes a costume. The symbolism of the clothing’s qualities may literally cover up the new wearer, transforming them, or conversely betraying them as poor, aged, fat, plain, or gaudy. In this way, secondhand clothing becomes souvenir. The garment is a souvenir of wealth. It is a souvenir of the life of one who could afford bespoke clothing. In this way, secondhand clothing can also become fetish—a material symbol of wealth. Wearing the clothing of someone else allows one to take on a different life while still retaining the realities of one’s own, much like Cinderella donning her magic ball gown. Although the possibility of purchasing secondhand clothes was novel and exciting at the time, the extent of its effect would have been limited. The gown may fool the prince at the royal ball, but Cinderella is still Cinderella, and has all the responsibilities that being Cinderella carries with it.

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Notes

¹ It is important to note that fashion history has experienced an uptick in interest from scholars in the past few decades. There is a wealth of new research and information on fashion history surfacing for many periods of history. The history of the medieval period, however, is still lacking in information on fashion theory and its impact on the medieval world. The marginalization of fashion in medieval studies is slowly easing up, largely in part due to an increase in feminist scholars working with medieval history, such as Bennett and Karras, and Power and Postan. Scholars who have worked on the study of medieval fashion include Scott and Koslin and Snyder. For an excellent overview of the evolution of fashion and its history in the Western world, refer to Tortora and Eubank.

² See, for instance Bolton, Dyer, Epstein, Lipson, and Postan and Habakkuk. These works have set a precedent in the study of English economic history, and are excellent references, but forego the topic of not only fashion but of clothing in general.

³ See, for example, Britnell, Carus-Wilson, Koweleski, Mate, Miller, and Thrupp.

⁴ Keeping up with contemporary fashions would have been difficult for women who had previously been making their own clothing, as fashions began to become more form-fitting, which required more skill in sewing and complex patterning. For a visual of the progression of fashionable silhouettes during the medieval period, refer to Tortora and Eubank.