CHAPTER 9

FROM BATTLEFIELD TO COURT:
THE INVENTION OF FASHION
IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

Odile Blanc

The fundamental transformations that influenced men’s way of dress in the fourteenth century established decisively the differences between the sexes. At the same time they inaugurated, in the Western history of fashion, modern ways of dressing by adopting short, fitted, and tailored elements as new criteria for elegance. The decades before and after 1400 are distinguished by such a diverse vestimentary landscape that it evoked a “Babel of costumes” for the great historian Jules Michelet. The period could equally be defined as “the age of the pourpoint,” since at this time the military garment served as an emblem of the martial function as well as a courtly mode.

Enormis Novitas

From the middle of the fourteenth century, in Italy as well as in France, England, Germany, and Bohemia, numerous chroniclers note that among their contemporaries there was a sudden transformation in manners of dress. Most of these texts were written well after the events they describe took place, and it is important to emphasize that from that time onward they are thus integrated into a narrative whose aim is essentially moralizing. By the yardstick of tradition, history had as its charge to record any novelty that appeared as a perilous disturbance. The century in which the chroniclers wrote was marked by the multiplication of armed conflicts, born out of a succession of quarrels between England and France. This period is better known under the name of “The Hundred Years’ War,” an age
of rivalries between local powers, especially in cities where local lordship had been well established. This was also the time of famine, poverty, persecutions of heretics and Jews, and epidemics. In these texts, mentions of the Black Death in the middle of the century were especially frequent. The authors passed judgment on the changes in dress through observations of contemporaries, worthy of mention in their writings. The new styles are described as important mutations, revelatory of the calamity of the time, and sometimes as premonitory signs of the approaching end.

Thus, in Rome, the anonymous biographer of Cola di Rienzo, often called the *Anonimo romano*, discussed the vestimentary transformations of the years 1339–1343. He drew attention to what he considered ill omens: the apparition of a comet; a famine due to bad weather; and the battle of Parabiago (1339) during the course of which members of a prestigious family, the Visconti, confronted one another. In 1340, Jean de Venette, a Carmelite friar at the convent at Place Maubert in Paris, probably was a witness to the events he described as he continued the historical account begun by his predecessors. The year 1340 was full of calamities for the kingdom of France: vestimentary changes again took place after the apparition of a comet and the victorious expedition of the English king, Edward III, at Sluys in Flanders. Gilles le Muisit, the abbot of the Benedictine monastery of Saint Martin of Tournai, dictated his *Annales* between 1350 and 1353, and reminisced about the year 1349 as a period of great disorder. The Plague struck the region of Tournai in this year, taking the life of the bishop. Then there were several processions by the Flagellants, disseminating fear in their wake. Finally, new dress outfits made their appearance, one more disgraceful than the other. In England, the *Chronicles of Westminster* was composed as the official historiography whose equivalent on the other side of the Channel was the *Grandes Chroniques de France*. In the year 1365, one of its authors, John of Reading, reported on the vestimentary changes among his English contemporaries in a similar, apocalyptic context.

All of these chroniclers express shock that one could no longer see a difference between the nobles and their servants, the clerics from the lay people, and the men-at-arms from the civilians. The men dressed in short garments were as affected in their outfits as the women were, thus bringing offense to their manly customs. And the elderly, who ought to set a better example, did not hesitate to adopt the new fashions. This sort of complaint conforms to a long tradition of the condemnation of luxury, voicing an opposition against the corruption of the morality of the day, and, due to an excess of refinement, the abandonment of the ascetic life of the ancients. After the great French defeats by the English (Crécy in 1346, Poitiers in 1356), the official historiography thus blamed the national calamity on such new mores, and castigated the adoption of the foreign