

The Importance of Fashion in Early Modern England

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Fashion and History

To twentieth century scholars the importance of cloth or clothing in society has often been debated. Its presence can be found in almost any society around the world at any point in history. In 1983 a conference entitled “Cloth and the Organization of the Human Experience” brought together scholars of anthropology, art, art history, and history to discuss the importance of cloth on people and societies. As one of these scholars put it cloth is “an economic commodity, a critical object in social exchange, an objectification of ritual intent, a vehicle of symbolic meaning, and an instrument of political power.” The participants of this conference concluded, “the language of cloth speaks not only to the creation and dissolution of personal and social identities but to wider issues of long-distance trade, colonialism, revolution, and nationalism.” Anthropologist Thomas Beidelman who was present at the conference stated his opinion that “cloth defines the limits and possibilities of people as actors in social relations” and added that “masking, hiding, and duplicity are equally important goals in the use of cloth.”¹

While a study of the impact of clothing and fashion in any society is no doubt interesting it is particularly fascinating in relation to the history and culture of the Western world. This paper examines the roots of fashion in Europe, specifically in England. Fashion was such an intrinsic part of society in early modern England (1485-1714) that a study of its trends and changes can help

¹ Jane Schneider and Annete B. Weiner. “Cloth and the Organization of Human Experience,” *Current Anthropology* 27, no. 2 (1986), 178-79.

define the political, social and economic climate of the day, and in some ways was itself the perpetrator of trouble and change during this period. This changing climate reflects a process of materialization and an emerging middle class.

II

Roots of Fashion in Europe

Studies of European fashion history begin usually with the Middle Ages following the changes of male military outfit. As battles were won dress was subtly changed here and there to reflect a victory, usually more for utilitarian than for aesthetic value. One instance of this is a Swiss victory over Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, at the Battle of Grandson in 1476. The Swiss soldiers used the acquired booty of fine silks and other materials to patch their torn clothes. This habit of patching different color cloths together was called “landsknecht” and soon became the style throughout European courts.² As one scholar put it “fame in war brought imitation in peace.”³

Fashion was often condemned by both church and state as a vice not to be indulged in by the wrong class of people. As Sara Warneke put it “...both state and Church expected people to act and dress according to their rank and discouraged them from overstepping the boundaries of clearly defined social behavior. Once people violated these boundaries, the authorities feared they could just as easily disregard the laws of God and state”.⁴

² James Laver, *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History*, 4th ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 1969), 77-78.

³ Herman Freudenberger, “Fashion, Sumptuary Laws, and Business,” *The Business History Review* 37, no. ½ (1963), 39.

⁴ Sara Warneke, “A Taste for Newfangledness: The Destructive Potential of Novelty in Early Modern England,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 26, no.4 (1995), 891.

As a result of a severe caste and manorial system in England and throughout Europe luxury goods were rarely seen by the general populous most of whom lived in the country. Sumptuous clothing throughout this time was generally very limited, obtainable only by the wealthy courts and nobility. With the old feudal systems breaking up the 15th century saw a growing trend towards urbanization. The population of towns brought people closer together and public awareness of clothing as symbols of class distinction rose. One could tell by the type of hat or cloak the profession of its wearer and colorful and luxurious fabrics had the effect of portraying different degrees of wealth and power.

The Renaissance brought new life to clothing and other luxurious goods as exciting new wares were making their way into the European market through Italy which was at this time the center for the production and distribution of many fashionable goods. Many of these goods were finding their way into the hands of not only the traditional receptors of the upper class but also to the thriving merchant class. By the 16th century clothing was such a symbol of prosperity and social distinction that obtaining these goods was the central ambition of many members of the middle class. Fashion provided a 'visual position of eminence' according to Herman Freudenberger in his study *Fashion, Sumptuary Laws, and Business* and was a powerful tool to raise ones standing politically and socially.

III

Growing Taste in the Sixteenth Century

Scholars have depicted the first half of the sixteenth century as a time of unprecedented changes in the relations of the church and state in England under

the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547). Henry's mark on the country was not only in his political decisions but also in his style of clothing. Not the first ruler to use fashion to meet his own ends and ambitions, Henry preferred copying the styles of the German and Spanish courts where he politically allied himself. Common attire in the court included baggy and bulky clothing of rich velvets, satins and cloth-of-gold in dark shades of purples, blues and reds, ornamented with fine furs and jewels.⁵ Such fine garments of heavy and grand adornment helped enforce the powerful and unyielding character that he is attributed with.

These fine clothes could also be seen in the streets of London where rich businessmen and their like displayed their own financial success and power by daring to copy the clothing of the royal court. Fashionable goods in the hands of the masses seriously challenged the traditional social structure in England where rich clothing that use to distinguish birth now marked only wealth. There were constant efforts made by the government to stop this unsettling occurrence such as the Act of 1533, which stated:

the necessary repressing, avoiding and expelling of the inordinate excess daily and more and more used in the sumptuous and costly array and apparel customarily worn in this realm, whereof hath ensued and daily do chance such sundry high and notable inconveniences as to be the great, manifest and notorious detriment of the common weal, the subversion of good and politic order in knowledge and distinction of people according to their estates, pre-

⁵ Laver, *Costume and Fashion*, 81-83.

eminences, dignities and degrees, and to the utter impoverishment and undoing of many inexpert and light persons inclined to pride, mother of all vices.⁶

Sumptuary Laws such as this were laws that “regulated and reinforced social hierarchies and morals through restrictions on clothing, food, and luxury expenditures.”⁷ These laws can be seen throughout Europe in the 16th century, as clothing became a universal symbol of wealth and power and middle class societies across the continent were growing.

In a peasant revolt in Germany one of the demands of the rebels was that they be able to wear red clothes. Red was a fashionable color in clothing in the early 16th century and sumptuary law in Germany apparently forbade all but the upper class to wear garments of this color.⁸

Sumptuary laws have been the interesting topic of research for many historians. It is important to note that in most cases such laws did not stop the consumption and wearing of the fine goods they restricted. Historians such as Christopher Breward in his book *The Culture of Fashion* focus on these laws not because of their effect on early modern societies but because they prove the staggering prevalence of fashionable goods throughout the classes of society and how popular and important the obtainment of these goods was.⁹

England was a particularly large and valuable market for sumptuous goods throughout the early modern period. The English predilection for new and

⁶ N. B. Harte and Kenneth G. Pointing, *Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe* (London: Heinemann, 1983), 139 quoted in Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 54.

⁷ *Wikipedia Encyclopedia*, “Sumptuary law,” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sumptuary_law.

⁸ Laver, *Costume and Fashion*, 86.

⁹ Breward, *Culture of Fashion*, 55.

fashionable things, especially foreign, was constantly commented on. According to Warneke “European and English writers portrayed the English people as an inconstant race, a people so continually fascinated with novelties that they were ready to abandon the old and trusted at the first glimpse of the newfangled”.¹⁰

Andrew Boorde examined this English characteristic in his work *Introduction of Knowledge* written c. 1542 which became a popular joke throughout Europe.

I am an English man, and naked I stand here,
Musyng in my mynde what raiment I shal were;
For now I wyll were thys, and now I wyl were that;
Now I wyl were I cannot tel what.

All new fashyons be pleasunt to me;
I wyl haue them, wheter I thryue of thee.¹¹

Boorde’s contemporary William Harrison was also particularly vocal in his comments of the English taste for the novel in his *Description of England* (1587):

Such, alas, is our nature that not our own but other men’s do most of all delight us; and for desire of novelty we oft exchange our finest cloth, corn, tin and wools for halfpenny cockhorses for children, dogs of wax or of cheese, twopenny tabors, leaden swords, painted feathers, gewgaws for fools, dogtricks for dizzards, hawkshoods, and suchlike trumpery.¹²

¹⁰ Warneke, “Newfangledness,” 882.

¹¹ Andrew Boorde, *Introduction of Knowledge* (1542) ed. Fredrick J. Furnivall (London, 1870), 116 quoted in Warneke, “Newfangledness,” 882-83.

¹² William Harrison, *Description of England* (1587) ed. Georges Edelen (New York: Cornell University Press for Folger Shakespeare Library, 1968) 359 quoted in Warneke, “Newfangledness,” 884.

Comments like Boorde's and Harrison's are common critiques of the English nature. Pope Junius III went so far as to partially blame the English Reformation on the English fascination for novelties and inconsistency. This characterization of the English continues through the 17th century and "Many commentators worried that the English people's preference for foreign goods would adversely affect the nation's political, religious, social, and cultural integrity."¹³ The English obsession with foreign luxury goods did not slow down despite laws and censure, on the contrary it reached new heights in the reign of Elizabeth I.

IV

The Elizabethan Fashion Legacy

The styles of Elizabethan period are marked for their Spanish influence and were brought to England by Elizabeth's predecessor and older sister Mary I who married Philip II of Spain in 1554. The somber Spanish style was quite different to the colorful costumes of Henry VIII that characterized his reign. Gone were the splendid purples and reds reflecting buoyant personality, to be replaced by severe black and other sober colors. The big and baggy garments were substituted with stiff and tight styles, which conveyed a hauteur and superiority with them, characteristic of the Spanish court.¹⁴

Elizabeth I (1558-1603) was very much a public queen, a celebrity who tried to appear good to all. As a queen Elizabeth is noted as a strong and effective ruler, her reign brought success and stability back to England. Temperamental and

¹³ Warneke, "Newfangledness," 884.

¹⁴ Laver, *Costume and Fashion*, 88-90.

shrewd, self-conscious and autocratic, Elizabeth had one of the most complex characters of all English monarchs. She had different faces, both physically and metaphorically, depending on her audience and need. The colorful and intricate character of Elizabeth perfectly complements the extravagant and complex dress of her period. Beidelman's observation that "masking, hiding, and duplicity" were important uses of clothing exactly fits the Elizabethan era as Elizabeth was a playful, playacting queen.

The Elizabethan court is noted for its refinement and elaborate costumes.¹⁵ Dress reached an all-time level of opulence and there were so many elements to a costume that it took hours to get ready. The process of dressing from clothing, to makeup, to hair and accessories is increasingly referred to as the *toilet* (or *toilette*). Many people did more than one *toilet* each day depending on their activities. An example of a typical Elizabethan *toilet* can be seen here by this contemporary comment in 1607:

Five hours ago I set a dozen maids to attire a boy like a nice gentlewoman; but there is such doing with their looking glasses, pinning, unpinning, setting, unsetting, formings and conformings, painting blew veins and cheeks; such a stir with sticks and combs, cascanets, dressings, purls, falls, squares, busks, bodies, scarfs, necklaces, carcanets, rebates, borders, tires, fans, palisades, puffs, ruffs, cuffs, muffs, pusles, fusles, partlets, frislets, bandlets, fillets, crosslets, pendulets, amulets, annulets, bracelets, and so many lets that yet she is scarce dressed to the girdle; and now there's such a calling for fardingales, kirtles, buskpoints, shoe ties, etc. that seven peddlers' shops – nay all Stourbridge Fair –

¹⁵Ibid., 102.

will scarce furnish her: a ship is sooner rigged by far, than a gentlewoman made ready.¹⁶

This comment shows not only the complexity of a typical Elizabethan outfit but also the amount of time it took to put on such an ensemble. We can assume that such effort was not wasted, as dress in the Elizabethan era was essential in defining a person's position.

The general use of cosmetics and perfumes made their debut in the fashionable courts of the Elizabethan era. Although such things had been around before this time they were not publicly accepted, used only by the very privileged or the highly scandalous. With such a fashion conscious queen on the throne who regularly used such things as 'ceruse cream' and 'Soliman's Water' there is no wonder that these goods became common and acceptable in this period.

Pastes, creams, lotions and powders, as well as hair dyes, toothpastes, perfumes and rouges were all bought by those women and men with any pretension to fashion. It is ironic that while these products tried to cover up such vile things and freckles, warts and scars from diseases such as smallpox, many of these goods contained hazardous minerals such as lead and mercury which caused a number of health problems as well as premature aging and falling out of teeth.¹⁷

The influence and restrictions of fashion on the upper class were even greater than those of the growing middle class market. To the members of the *ton* (social elite in London) fashion was an expectation and requirement of everyday

¹⁶ Breward, *Culture of Fashion*, 42.

¹⁷ Maggie Angeloglou, *A History of Make-up* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1970), 48-54.

life. Both Men and women needed to put on a show for their betters, their peers, and the lower orders whenever they left the house. Like actors in a play their costumes were a necessity in defining their roles and their characters. The great city of London provided a stage for the display of fashionable *toilets*. A spectator of such a show said this:

Where the gallants would strut up and down in their new clothes between ten and twelve o'clock in the morning. Since their intention was to impress all present, the tailors, hiding behind the pillars, would treat the occasion as an impromptu fashion show and make notes on the latest cut, color, trimmings and accessories.¹⁸

The overwhelming consumption of fashionable goods in the 16th century brought about not only social but also moral and economical concerns in early modern England and across Europe. There was considerable reticence of how clothing, cosmetics and other fashionable goods destroyed traditional values as costumes masked the inner self and promoted frivolous and unscrupulous behavior.

The worry of how women were using these products to seduce men can be seen in this Elizabethan edict:

Any woman who through the use of false hair, Spanish hair pads, make-up, false hips, steel busks, panniers, high-heeled shoes or other devices, leads a subject of her majesty into marriage, shall be punished with the penalties of witchcraft.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jane Ashelford, *Dress in the Age of Elizabeth I* (1988), 44 quoted in Breward, *Culture of Fashion*, 50.

¹⁹ Angeloglou, *History of Make-up*, 45.

The concern of the effect of fashion on men was different but also prevalent:

Velvetbreeches had caused vast misery in English society, raising rents in an effort to finance his expensive lifestyle. Costly velvets, vainglory, and pride reigned at the expense of dignity, charity, and the honest country life. No longer was “public commodity” foremost in the “upstart” gentlemen’s mind, but only private gain.²⁰

These comments show that as the country was rapidly turning into a giant consumer market and fashion and frivolity were largely sought after there were those that fiercely opposed this phenomenon. As these comments are prevalent throughout the early modern period it can be seen that in many cases the critics themselves did not forgo to be fashionable themselves.

England was noted in this time for having a looser class structure and less distinction between the classes and wealth and goods throughout the classes than other European nations resulting in more wealth and goods throughout the levels of society. However there were many that were still concerned with the encroachment into the upper class of lesser born individuals as one man said “those who are neither of nobility, gentility nor yeomanry, no, nor yet any magistrate, or officer in the commonwealth, go daily in silks, velvets, satins, damasks, taffetas and such like, notwithstanding that they be both base by birth, mean by estate and servile by calling”²¹

Although London was the center of the fashionable world for the English much of the rural population knew of and was addicted to novelties as well. Some

²⁰ Robert Greene, *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier* (1592) in *The Life and Complete Works in Prose and Verse of Robert Greene M.A.* ed. A.B. Grosart (London, 1881-1886), 260 quoted in Warneke, “Newfangledness,” 891.

²¹ Breward, *Culture of Fashion*, 55.

of the gentry were particularly well connected to London as a record from this country estate shows:

Throughout the 1570s, Francis Willoughby maintained a large and powerful household at Wollaton in which the fashions of London and the Court were reflected in every aspect of daily life. Frequent notations in his household accounts record the purchase of books, fabrics or other luxury goods in London, and it is clear that many of the activities in which he participated drew their vitality and inspiration far less from the culture of the surrounding countryside than from that of a network of powerful gentry and aristocratic landowners linked by shared interests and ambitions.²²

The Elizabethan government was just as concerned with what the impact of the widely popular obsession with novelties and consumption of luxury foreign goods was to the nation as previous generations were. However by the second half of the 16th century these concerns were not only regarding the blending of class distinction, there were also great concerns regarding the economic implications of so much being spent on foreign goods. Some attempts were made to stifle the growing trend but to no avail. In 1566 the gates of London were guarded daily to 'ensure that prohibited dress did not enter London unchecked'²³ episodes like this were only token gestures as there was really no effort to check what every person in London was wearing.

V

²² A. Friedman, *House and Household in Elizabethan England: Wollaton Hall and Willoughby Family* (Chicago, 1989), 27-28 quoted in Breward, *Culture of Fashion*, 59.

²³ Harte and Pointing, *Cloth and Clothing*, 147 quoted in Breward, *Culture of Fashion*, 54.

National Economic Concerns Related to Fashion

The economic concerns related to the popular consumption of foreign goods were not only a concern in England but in other societies in Europe that were facing the same spending trends. In France the Duc de Sully, administrator to Henry IV, created many ordinances in the late 16th century prohibiting the importation of leading Italian goods and instead created incentive that nourished the local production of these same goods.²⁴ The French *Letters Patents of Declaration* in 1643 continued to prohibit foreign luxury goods into the 17th century. These laws laid out lengthy and specific restrictions on the goods detailing how much of a certain fabric could be used in making a piece of clothing and restricting numerous accessories such as “Belts, Girdles, Swordhangers, Hatbands, Points, Garters, Scarfes, Knots, and Ribbands, any woollen or linen Clothes of Gold or Silver, true or counterfeit, Tinsell, Embroideries or Pearles or precious stones, gold or silver buttons of Goldsmithes worke; neither in like manner and Laces, Fringes, Embossings, Twists, Purles, Buttons, Velvet, Sattin, Taffeties...”²⁵

The French seemed to have better luck than most with sumptuary laws as their local industries flourished and by the end of the 17th century France was the foremost producer of luxury goods.²⁶ Others attempted the same thing as “Prussia, Russia, and the Habsburg monarchy, among others, used the power of

²⁴ Freudenberger, “Fashion, Sumptuary Laws, and Business,” 41-42.

²⁵ *Letters patentes of declaration of the King of France, for the reformation of excesse in Aparell, and for regulating of the same* (London: E. Purslowe for Henry Seile, 1634).

²⁶ Freudenberger, “Fashion, Sumptuary Laws, and Business,” 42.

government to encourage, direct, and finance new enterprises so that fashion goods and luxuries need not be bought abroad.”²⁷

Were it not for a trend of urbanization and a massive movement of people into cities fashion may have remained the hobby of the privileged minority. But urbanization brought about prosperity and opportunities. To the middle class businessman the multitude of goods demanded for consumption meant an opportunity to make money. Stores of all sorts were opened to accommodate the demand for special items of beauty and adornment. One contemporary notes this change in London:

I have seen within these twenty years, when there were not of these haberdashers that sell French or Milan caps, glasses, daggers, swords, girdles, and such things not a dozen in all London. And now from the Tower to Westminster along, every street is full of them...²⁸

London was indeed the capital for many luxury goods as one traveler commented on:

This city of London is so large and splendidly built, so populous and excellent in crafts and merchant citizens, and so prosperous, that it is not only the first in the whole realm of England, but is esteemed one of the most famous in all Christendom...Most of the inhabitants are employed in commerce, they buy, sell and trade in all corners of the globe... There are so many wealthy merchants and

²⁷ Ibid., 47.

²⁸ Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (1978), 15-16 quoted in Breward, *Culture of Fashion*, 56.

money changers in this city, some of whom sell costly wares while others only deal in money or wholesale transactions.²⁹

To the creative businessman the taste for foreign goods was cashed in on by coping or faking special wares. “Lotions, potions, ointments and creames were churned out by alchemical confidence tricksters or in the still rooms and bedchambers of country houses”³⁰ Peddlers of these made up goods are often characterized in the literature of the day such as Shakespeare’s *The Winters Tale*. Makers of miracle potions needed to be careful that their goods were not too successful otherwise they would be arrested for witchcraft.³¹

Many merchants were among the conservatives who criticized the detrimental effects fashionable goods had on society but as they bemoaned at the same time they still made money on manufacturing these same goods.³² The successful and wealthy businessmen were the most educated class of society and became the natural administrators of the country which laid the groundwork for troubles in the 17th century.

VI

Fashion and Politics in the Seventeenth Century

Compared to the extravagant styles of the Elizabethan period the styles following it were relatively simple. The first half of the 17th century was a relatively stagnant period of fashion for England. “fashionable dress was

²⁹ Thomas Platter’s *Travels in England 1599*, trans. C. Williams (1937), 156-57 quoted in Breward, *Culture of Fashion*, 53.

³⁰ Angeloglou, *History of Make-up*, 48.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

³² Freudemberger, “Fashion, Sumptuary Laws, and Business,” 44.

simplified, elegant and ‘easy’ in comparison to elite styles of the previous century...”³³ With the Civil War and the Commonwealth dress became used a subject of propaganda and criticism comparing the “voluptuous cavaliers” to the “self-denying roundheads.”³⁴ Although some puritans favored the popular Dutch styles of sober black and simple raiment on the whole dress remained luxurious if simple throughout the Commonwealth and met a magnificent revival in the reign of Charles II.

Coming from a protracted period of living abroad in France, Charles II (1660-1685) favored the rich styles of the court of Louis XIV. His reign is characterized as a period of loose morals and relaxed lifestyle opposite to that of the Commonwealth. Charles was a connoisseur of all the luxuries life had to offer and put his personal stamp on this time in England with his taste. “The general effect of men’s clothes at this period was of a fantastic negligence, well suited to the moral climate of the Restoration Court.”³⁵ “Taste and elegance...were abandon for extravagance and folly...”³⁶ Charles provided a fertile ground for which many new fashions arose especially for male dress. The three piece suit, waistcoat (vest), cravat (tie), elaborate use of ribbon, and long wigs were all concocted for the court of Charles II.

As the French fashions held unopposed sway over the English there were many who felt this reliance to be humiliating. Discontent for being so reliant on

³³ Breward, *Culture of Fashion*, 98.

³⁴ Tamsyn Williams, “Magnetic Figures: Polemical Prints of the English Revolution in Gent and Llewellyn,” *Renaissance Bodies* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990) quoted in Breward, *Culture of Fashion*, 103.

³⁵ Laver, *Costume and Fashion*, 112.

³⁶ F.W. Fairholt, *Costume in England* (1885) quoted in Laver, *Costume and Fashion*, 109-10.

the French fashions was a growing feeling. A publication entitled *Tyrannus Or the Mode: In A Discourse of Sumptuary Laws* dating from 1661 criticizes the English dependence on French fashions. The author, famous diarist John Evelyn, finds it personally mortifying that so great a country should not set its own fashion trends. The French, according to Evelyn, use their power in the fashion industry as a commodity, something to be traded and held over the heads of other envious countries. He comments, “Believe it, La Mode de France is one of the best Returns which they make.”³⁷

Evelyn calls for the Englishmen to assert themselves and adopt their own fashions, which would make them look much better in the view of the world. He speaks fondly of a day when England is free from imported fashions, a day that will make “the whole Nation knit as one to the heart of the Sovereign.”³⁸ Fashion in the 17th century and onward was a nationalistic concern.

Charles did not remain loyal to the French fashions for long. In 1666 Charles II declared “in Council...his resolution of setting a new fashion for clothes, which he will never alter.”³⁹ His intention was to establish an English fashion, independent from the dominating French styles. According to historian Esmond S. de Beer, this decision came at a time when England and France “were most widely divergent in their policies.”⁴⁰

³⁷ John Evelyn, *Tyrannus Or the Mode: In a Discourse of Sumptuary Law* (London: Printed for G. Bedel, and T. Collins, 1661), 6.

³⁸ Evelyn, *Tyrannus*, 22.

³⁹ Samuel Pepys, *Diary* (Oct. 11, 1666) quoted in Esmond S. de Beer, “King Charles II’s Own Fashion: An Episode in Anglo-French Relations 1666-1670,” *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 2, no. 2 (1938), 105.

⁴⁰ de Beer, *Charles II’s Own Fashion*, 115.

Charles' penchant for designing his own fashion mainly resided in the introduction of a new style of vest. Up until this time the prevailing fashion for men was baggy loose clothing which one man complained, "make thee look and waddle...like a great fat slovenly water dog."⁴¹ Charles' vest was a close fitting, long garment that was worn underneath an outer coat called a tunic. Tunics were worn open to expose the magnificence of the vests, which were made of fine fabrics such as velvets and silks. These garments were so fine that one writer commented that the vests themselves "cost at least one hundred pounds; some ornamented with jewels worth more than a thousand."⁴² Charles was also said to have had good relations with the East especially Persia where his style of vest may have come from.⁴³

At Charles' decree these vests became extremely popular in the upper class as the French fashion was rapidly dropped. It appears that it was a necessity for men to follow the king's fashion in order to show their loyalty to the crown. Charles' fashion however did not last long. By 1670 Charles as well as his aristocratic followers abandon this fashion and returned to the current French styles.

There are some different theories as to why Charles rescinded his oath that he was "never to alter." De Beer points out that in 1670 the Secret Treaty of Dover was signed which mended the rift between England and France.⁴⁴ There is

⁴¹ William Wycherley, *The Gentleman Dancing Master* (1661-1662), quoted in C. Willett Cunnington and Phillis Cunnington. *Handbook of English Costume in the Seventeenth Century* (Boston: Plays, Inc., 1972), 150.

⁴² de Beer, *Charles II's Own Fashion*, 110.

⁴³ Laver, *Costume and Fashion*, 115.

⁴⁴ de Beer, *Charles II's Own Fashion*, 115.

also evidence from Samuel Pepys' diary that Louis XIV, the king of France, dressed his footmen in vests to mock Charles, and this was the reason the style was discarded.⁴⁵

Whatever Charles's reason to abandon his new style was, this story is an important example of how fashion was used in politics. Perhaps more importantly this story demonstrates the power fashion held over people and nations, as ruler's intent on personal feuds had the power to guide people like puppets. The fact that fashion was used as such a medium shows its level of importance in society.

VII

Gender and Fashion in the Seventeenth Century

Late 17th century views on fashion represent an overall feeling of acceptance to their importance in daily life, especially in the upper class. As John Evelyn comments "though Garments be Superficial, and extrinsecal to us, they are yet of such notable presage" that they could not be ignored.⁴⁶ The Earl of Chesterfield once advised his son "dress is a very foolish thing; and yet is a very foolish thing for a man not to be well dressed."⁴⁷

There was a certain group of men however that were criticized for their dedication to fashion. These men often referred to as *fops*, received substantial reticule in print, and in no doubt everyday life. They could often be identified by

⁴⁵ Cunnington, *Handbook*, 134.

⁴⁶ Evelyn, *Tyrannus*, 14.

⁴⁷ Terence S. Turner, "The Social Skin" in *Reading the Social Body* (1993), 36 quoted by Jessica Munns and Penny Richards, ed. *The Clothes That Wear Us: Essay on Dressing and Transgressing in the Eighteenth-Century Culture* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), 40.

their flamboyant fashions, decked out in an abundance of accessories and exaggerate styles. Evelyn comments upon observing one fop:

It was a fine silken thing which I spied walking th' other day through Westminster Hall that had as much ribbon on him as would have plundered six shops, and set up twenty Country Pedlers: All his body was drest like a May-pole.... A Fregat newly rigg'd kept not half such a clatter in a storme, as this Puppets Streamers did when the Wind was in his Shroud's; the Motion was Wonderfull to behold.⁴⁸

The Earl of Chesterfield later wrote “the difference... between a man of sense and a fop, is, that the fop values himself upon his dress; and the man of sense laughs at it, at the same time that he knows that he must not neglect it.”⁴⁹

The use of wigs in fashion in the seventeenth century for men grew gradually more common and increasingly elaborate as the century progressed. From the 1660's onward it was a must for fashionable men to shave their heads and adopt the use of wigs, also called Periwigs or Perukes. There were several different styles of wigs, which were selected depending on the occasion, these were often powdered white or dyed natural colors. Some wigs were so large that one man commented that it was “large enough to have loaded a camel.” At this time it was also fashionable for men to comb their wigs in public as a leisurely activity.⁵⁰

In the ongoing debates and resistance to fashions came a number of objections against the use of wigs. In 1698 an article entitled *A Faithful Testimony against Extravagant and Unnecessary Wiggs* was published for just such a purpose. The author of this article, Ambrose Rigge, condemned the use of wigs as

⁴⁸ Evelyn, *Tyrannus*, 11.

⁴⁹ Turner, “Social Skin,” in *Reading the Social Body*, 36 quoted by Munns and Richards, *The Clothes That Wear Us*, 40.

⁵⁰ Tom Brown, *Letters from the Dead to the Living* (1702) quoted in Cunnington, *Handbook*, 165.

an unheavenly act and a disgrace to any of the Lord's children. Rigge claimed it was a sin to shave a perfectly healthy head of hair in order to wear a wig.⁵¹ With the strictures of the *ton* fashionable men almost always wore wigs, to the less fashionable natural hair was still worn and usually styled to look like a wig.⁵²

Female fashions underwent as much or more scrutiny as male fashions did. By the late 17th century fashion could be seen and talked about in newspapers, magazines, books and poems. Two of these publications *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* were extremely forceful in their messages to middle class society on the detriment of fashion. As one of the early *Tatler* papers stated "The general purpose of this Paper, is to expose the false Arts of Life, to pull off the Disguises of Cunning, Vanity, and Affectation, and to recommend a general Simplicity in our Dress, our Discourse, and our Behaviour."⁵³

A poem, written by Mary Evelyn, the daughter of John Evelyn, entitled *Mundus Muliebris: Or, The ladies Dressing-Room Unlock'd, and her Toilette Spread* pokes fun of women's occupation with fashion. Evelyn compares women to ships because of the amount of care they need and number of parts they each have. She describes the elements of the *toilet* and all the little things a woman is bound to have in her dressing room in such detail that she includes at the end of her poem *The Fop-Dictionary*. This catalogue provides an alphabetical listing of terms, mostly French, which define to the unfashionable or unknowing the "Art Cosmetick," or art of female ornamentation. These terms that describe feminine

⁵¹ Ambrose Rigge, *A Faithful Testimony against Extravagant and Unnecessary Wiggs*. (London: Printed by T. Sowle, 1698).

⁵² Cunnington, *Handbook*, 163.

⁵³ See Erin Mackie, *Market a la Mode* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 1.

baubles were often the target for jest as well. One woman defended herself by saying “would men suggest that the Lady said to her maid ‘Pass me that thing to wear on my thing - no, not that thing, the other thing’?”⁵⁴

Mary Evelyn’s poem is one of the few publications that can be found where a woman is making fun of her own sex. When published, her father was credited as the author and only in his diary does he name his daughter as its author. Can it be assumed then that woman, like men only tolerated fashion? Found it foolish but a must in their society? Since the evidence comes mostly from male opinion and there is very little female opinion on the subject it is hard to say for sure.

While the richer middle class and upper class could afford to spend amazing amounts of money on clothing and other finery it was the common practice of the less wealthy to spend their money on accessories. “ribbons and other items of haberdashery have been identified as the means by which members of the lower social orders could take elements of elite fashion, customizing them for their own use without incurring the expense or moral problems of the whole package...”⁵⁵

One of the few examples of sumptuary laws in the late seventeenth century is an order by the Duke of Norfolk on behalf of the king as to the dress women were required to wear if attending the queen’s coronation in 1685. This order details the exact dress a woman was to wear if she was a peer and describes to the inch how long a train was to be and exactly how much of each fabric was to

⁵⁴ John Evelyn and Mary Evelyn, *The Fop-Dictionary* (London: 1690) in Iris Brook. *Dress and Undress, the Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1958), 41-49.

⁵⁵ Breward, *Culture of Fashion*, 99.

be used. The baroness's gown was the simplest, with the shortest train, only a yard on the ground, and the least amount of ermine and velvet. The duchess's costume was the grandest, with a train two yards on the ground and had the most use of ermine and velvet.⁵⁶

The 18th century brought about a veritable "consumer revolution" in regard to all areas of production and consumption including architecture, household goods, décor and furnishings, food, gardening, printing on books and poems, and the arts of painting and sculpture.⁵⁷ According to historian Neil McKendrick:

More men and women than ever before in human history enjoyed the experience of acquiring material possessions. Objects which for centuries had been the privileged possessions of the rich came, within the space of a few generations, to be within the reach of a larger part of society than ever before, and, for the first time, to be within the legitimate aspirations of almost all of it.⁵⁸

Another scholar comments that "In this world, shopping becomes a ritual of urban life, a ritual that provides voyeuristic pleasures, as well as materials for the internal and external fashioning of the self."⁵⁹ It has been stated by some scholars that the demand for fashionable goods created the groundwork for capitalistic industry and the incentive for many important industries in England.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Henry Howard, Duke of Norfolk, *The Duke of Norfolk's Order about the Habit the Ladies are to be in that attend the Queen at her Coronation* (London: Nat. Thompson, 1685).

⁵⁷ Breward, *Culture of Fashion*, 110.

⁵⁸ Neil McKendrick, "Introduction" in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, eds. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumm (London: Europa Publications Limited, 1982), 1 see Cynthia Lowenthal, "Performing Nations on the Restoration Stage: Wycherley's Gentleman Dancing-Master." in Munns and Richards, *The Clothes That Wear Us*, 50.

⁵⁹ Mackie, *Market*, 49.

⁶⁰ Freudenberger, "Fashion, Sumptuary Laws, and Business," 38 and 46.

One study states “a state where fashion has uncontrolled sway hold promise of prosperity”.⁶¹

Fashion and luxury goods became increasingly more important throughout the early modern period and this can be used as a gauge of society and government of the time. In some ways mirroring change and in some others propelling change into a more modern and egalitarian society, fashion challenged class structure, disturbed the wealth on nations and threatened the morals of early modern England. This being said, it also helped with the creation of a rich and thriving middle class and gave more people opportunities to have better things and gain a better life. Trade, economy, as well as individual and class thinking were all changing and being redefined during the period under review.

⁶¹ Ibid., 44.

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