



Figure 8. Sleeves.

Raffaello Sanzio, *Jeanne d'Aragon, Queen of Naples* (1518). Oil on canvas, 120 cm × 96 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: Hervé Lewandowski. Photo Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.

condition . . . who wear — or who wear in future — any gold, silver, pearls, precious stones, bells, ribbons of gold or silver, or cloth of silk brocade on their bodies or heads . . . for the ornamentation of their bodies . . . will be required to pay each year . . . 50 florins.”¹ In 1415 the same city decreed that the sleeves of a woman’s undergowns not be of silk or velvet, and

¹ Gene Brucker, *The Society of Renaissance Florence: A Documentary Study* (New York, 1971), p. 180. This was a huge tax, equivalent to the annual earnings of a well-paid craftsman. For more on sleeves and sumptuary laws in Italy, see Evelyn Welch, “New, Old, and Second-Hand Culture: The Case of the Renaissance Sleeve,” in *Revaluing Renaissance Art*, eds. Gabriele Neher and Rupert Shepherd (Aldershot, UK, 2000).

4 The Dangers of Dress

THE PERIOD BETWEEN ABOUT 1300 AND 1600 WAS EUROPE’S great age of sumptuary legislation, a time when princes, urban magistrates, and church officials alike relentlessly sought to control display, especially the display of dress. Scholars are agreed that commerce was principally responsible for this legislative furor. Commerce not only gave new people access to luxuries that had once been the sole preserve of the nobility; it also radically increased the supply of such goods, dress above all. As legislators repeatedly complained, the result was not only social disorder but also moral rot.

This chapter argues that even more was at stake in sumptuary legislation’s obsession with dress. The problem was not just the threat to social order or morals. It was the disruption of the presumed relationship between the material and the immaterial. Dress was the central target of sumptuary laws because commerce eroded the ability of dress to do what it had traditionally been thought able to do: reliably express identity. Under the pressure of commodification, dress was abstracted as price, thereby losing specific material meaning, and at the same time it was endlessly rematerialized in ephemeral forms — as fashion. It was therefore not just the link between appearance and social status that was at issue, and not even simply the link between appearance and personhood. The worries about dress were an expression of Europeans’ uncertainty about the link between the material and the immaterial.

In 1373, the city of Florence ordered that “all women and girls, whether married or not, whether betrothed or not, of whatever age, rank and



Figure 9. *Royal Splendor*.

Jean Clouet, *François I, King of France* (c. 1525). Wood on panel, 96 × 74 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

in 1456 it forbade any woman to have more than one pair of brocaded sleeves worth more than 10 florins.²

Painters elsewhere in Europe could easily imagine costumes of the kind described in the Italian laws and depicted above, but the legislators in northern lands did not typically concentrate on women's sleeves, nor even on women, in writing their sumptuary laws. Men were their principal concern, and legislators there worried about more than sleeves or undergowns. A French royal ordinance dating from 1279 ordered that no duke, count, prelate, baron, or others may have more than four pairs of robes made of squirrel or any robes of cloth costing more than 30

² Carole Collier Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence*, pp. 194–7.

seus tournois per Parisian yard. The legislation seemed almost desperate to ensure that the king must be recognizable as king.³

Across the channel in England, the crown passed the first such law in 1337; it forbade fur on clothes for all except the royal family, prelates, earls, barons, knights, and ladies and “people of the holy church.”⁴ In 1497, Archduke Philip the Fair issued a similar regulation for the county of Flanders that generally prohibited the wearing of velvet and silk, except for wives and daughters of the knights of the Golden Fleece, along with barons and baronets.⁵ Other legislators targeted the urban

³ For this ordinance (and that of 1294), see Sarah-Grace Heller, “Anxiety, Hierarchy, and Appearance in Thirteenth-Century Sumptuary Laws and the *Romançe de la Rose*,” *French Historical Studies* 27, no. 2 (Spring 2004), pp. 311–48. According to Heller, there was one earlier ordinance, of 1188, issued to regulate Crusaders’ apparel; another early regulation of 1283 that is often mentioned in scholarly literature is, she reports, lost. The French crown issued eighteen such ordinances between 1485 and 1660.

⁴ John Scattergood, “Fashion and Morality in the Late Middle Ages,” in *England in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Daniel Williams (Woodbridge, UK, 1987), p. 260. In 1463, the same crown ordered that “no person under the estate of a lord [may] wear any manner of cloth or silk being of the color of purple.” 3 Edw. IV, c. 5; SR 2; pp. 399–402; cited in Alan Hunt, *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law* (New York, 1996), p. 128. The restriction was repeated in what was probably the most extensive of the English royal legislation of this type, the 1533 “Act for the Reformation of Excess in Apparel.” It forbade crimson, scarlet, or blue velvets to any but dukes, marquises, or earls.

⁵ Raymond van Uyrven, “Showing off One’s Rank in the Middle Ages,” in *Showing Status: Representations of Social Positions in the Late Middle Ages*, eds. Wim Blockmans and Antheun Janse (Turnhout, Belgium, 1999), pp. 19–35, 28–30. Men “living as noblemen or men of standing” were also permitted 8 ells of such cloth, whereas the wives and daughters of officers in the ducal household and other “truly noble” women were allowed velvet, satin, and damask for their accessories. Also see Raymond van Uyrven, *De zinnelijke middeleeuwen* (Leuven, 1998), pp. 121–49. For additional information about sumptuary legislation in the Low Countries (where the record seems to be extraordinarily slight in comparison to England or Italy), see Wim Blockmans, “Vete, partijstrijd en staatsmacht,” in *Bloedvloed, partijstrijd en pacificatie in laat-middeleeuws Holland*, ed. J. W. Marsilje (Hilversum, Neth., 1990), pp. 29–30; in the same volume, see remarks by Hanno Brand, “Twistende Leidenars: Verkenningen naar het voortkomen van clan en kerngezin, partij en factie aan de hand van drie oproeren in een Hollandse stad in de 15e eeuw,” p. 103, and M. J. van Gent, “De Hoekse

population. In 1470, Duke Ludwig the Rich of Bavaria forbade all furs to ordinary citizens in the city of Landshut and the region of Oberpfalz, specifically denying artisans the right to wear "the feathers of herons and ostriches."⁶ Dress was not the sole target of such legislation; other significant objects of the laws were public events like funerals, weddings, and christenings, but these ceremonies were frequently linked to the dress regulations, as though the two forms of display posed similar dangers.⁷ Sumptuary legislation did not originate in late medieval Europe. The classical Greek and Roman worlds knew such laws, and a few texts

factie in Leiden circa 1445-1490: Het verhaal van verliezers," pp. 131-2. On Burgundian costume in general, see Michèle Beaulieu and Jeanne Bayle, *Le costume en Bourgogne, de Philippe le Hardi à Charles le Téméraire* (Paris, 1956) and on dress and marginality, see Marleen Maes, "Kledij als teken van marginaliteit in de late middeleeuwen," in *Sociale structuren en topografie van armoede en rijkdom in de 14e en 15e eeuw*, eds. Walter Prevenier and Raymond Van Uyven (Ghent, 1985), pp. 135-56.

⁶ The same law permitted sons of the town's councilmen to sport a knife with a silver handle, a silver belt, and a silver (neck) chain: Veronika Baur, *Kleiderordnungen in Bayern vom 14. bis zum 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1975), p. 42.

⁷ Many fewer - perhaps less than 1% - regulated possessions such as horses, armor, and servants, or they restricted the size or design of buildings, often by limiting the number and size of windows. However, it is impossible to precisely quantify the legislation by type. Some of it was embedded in regulations about public order more generally, so that it is hard to find a basis for measuring statistical significance. Most was included with other sumptuary rules, but the articles of these ordinances were so variously detailed that one law cannot be compared to another in terms of the items named, the people addressed, or the costs itemized. However, it is obvious that dress dominated.

Neithard Bulst, "Kleidung als sozialer Konfliktstoff: Problem kleidegesetzlicher Normierung im sozialen Gefüge," *Sozialium* 44 (1993), pp. 32-47, estimates that in the German Empire some 1,350 clothing laws were issued between 1244 and 1816 by 150 municipalities and 30 territorial sovereigns. Laws regulating weddings, funerals, and christenings were even more numerous in that part of Europe (2,300 laws by 650 issuers), but many of them also included clothing regulations. Also see his "Zum Problem städtischer und territorialer Kleider-, Aufwands- und Luxusgesetzgebung in Deutschland (13.-Mitte 16. Jahrhundert)," in *Renaissance du pouvoir législative et genèse de l'état*, eds. André Gouron and Albert Rigaudière (Montpellier, Fr., 1988). For further estimates on the number and type of these ordinances in the German-speaking territories, also see his "Les ordonnances somptuaires en Allemagne: expression de l'ordre social urbaine (XIVe-XVe siècles)," *Comptes-rendus des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres* 137, no. 3 (1993), pp. 771-81.

have survived from the Church and royal courts of the early and high Middle Ages that similarly restricted dress or the expenses of funerals, weddings, and the like.⁸ Still, late medieval and early modern governors wrote a distinct and dramatic chapter in the history of sumptuary law. In no other period did lawmakers give dress and the display associated with rites of passage such as weddings and funerals such frenzied attention, and nowhere was the legislation so abundant, detailed, and repetitive.⁹

⁸ On the Greek and Roman legislation, see N. B. Harte, "State Control of Dress and Social Change in Pre-Industrial England," in *Trade, Government and Economy in Pre-industrial England: Essays Presented to F. J. Fisher*, eds. Donald Curthbert Coleman and A. H. John (London, 1976), pp. 132-65, p. 133. On the classical and medieval, see Baur, *Kleiderordnungen*, p. 2, and James A. Brundage, "Sumptuary Laws and Prostitution in Late Medieval Italy," *Journal of Medieval History* 13 (1987), pp. 343-55, pp. 343-4.

Non-European populations were also subjected to sumptuary laws. From medieval and early modern China and Japan we have particularly good records of such practices, and spottier evidence from elsewhere leaves little doubt that ecclesiastical and secular governments alike frequently thought it necessary to tell people what and how much to eat and drink on certain public occasions, or what to wear and what not to wear. There are also scattered examples of such legislation from later centuries in western Europe, beyond the late medieval and early modern periods.

Sumptuary legislation survived well into the nineteenth century in many places, although it was then increasingly incorporated into general "police" ordinances. Some scholars have argued that this regulatory impulse extends into our own age. Although western governments today do not tell people what to wear or how much to spend on their weddings or funerals, they do seek to control alcohol consumption and the use of drugs and tobacco, prescribe the use of seatbelts and motorcycle helmets, promote good nutrition, and in general celebrate the sound body and mind, all in an energetic effort to "govern" the civic whole. For this argument see Hunt, *Governance*, pp. 410-28, and esp. Alan Hunt, "The Governance of Consumption: Sumptuary Laws and Shifting Forms of Regulation," *Economy and Society* 25, no. 3 (1996), pp. 410-27.

⁹ Catherine Koveri Killeby, "Practical Problems in the Enforcement of Italian Sumptuary Law, 1200-1500," in *Crime, Society and the Law in Renaissance Italy*, eds. Trevor Dean and K. J. P. Lowe (Cambridge, UK, 1994), pp. 99-120, reports that more than forty Italian cities issued such laws between 1200 and 1500. Included among them, in addition to Bologna and Florence, were Genoa, Rome, Milan, Venice, Lucca, and Siena. Countless German and Swiss cities did so as well, as did most of the territorial principalities or national monarchies, including England, France, Castile, Catalonia, Aragon, Poland, and Russia. Bulst, "Kleidung als sozialer Konfliktstoff," p. 32, reports that the earliest

To judge from the quantity and the intensity of the surviving legislation, in that age a good governor had no more urgent task than to ensure that the population was appropriately attired. In the minds of those princes, their counselors, and the urban magistrates who issued these laws, dress was dangerous, and it somehow compounded the dangers associated with ceremonies of marriage, burial, and christening.

Legislators themselves regularly insisted that sumptuary laws were intended to prevent social, moral, and economic decay. Historians have generally adopted the same explanations for the laws, usually concluding that the basic problem was a threat to social hierarchy: commerce had made clothing an unreliable signifier of social status.¹⁰ This chapter argues, however, that more was at stake: dress had become an unreliable identifier of the self. Although its traditional capacity to establish both social and personal identity had been magnified as commerce brought new fabrics, styles, and ornamentations from workshops near and far, the expansion of possibilities for display came at a huge cost. Thanks to its abundance and variety, dress was losing its ability to do its traditional cultural work, and the erosion of the presumed equation between appearance and personhood raised doubts about the relationship between the material and the immaterial more generally.

SUMPTUARY DISCOURSES

Contemporaries justified their legislation with the help of several discourses, the most general of which was an age-old critique of superfluous wealth and luxury drawn from Judeo-Christian and classical moralist tracts.¹¹ Refusing the usual medieval justification that such wealth both

known law dates from 1157 in Genoa and that the German areas, although later to adopt the practice, clung longest to the agenda.

¹⁰ Neithard Bulst has offered a more complex explanation of these laws that turns in part on chronology, particularly in the Germanic areas on which his research has concentrated. For his general argument, see the references in note 9 and the further discussion in the section “The Body on Display” in this chapter.

¹¹ For the general critique of wealth, see Chapter 5. Luxury was associated with original sin and disruption of a hierarchy established by the divine, for Eve’s crime was to seek that to which humans had no right. For this discussion, see in particular John Sekora, *Luxury: The Concept in Western Thought, Eden to*

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permitted the charity expected of Christians and financed the *largesse* and *liberalité* that secured rule and social order, legislators flatly charged that luxury was a mark of pride, incontinence, lust, and envy – in short, a breeding ground for moral collapse.¹² For example, English laws of 1522–33 forbade “costlye arraye and apparell” because it led to the “utter impoverishment and undoing of many inexpert and light persons inclined to pride, moder [mother] of all vices.”¹³ A law from Nuremberg in 1654 spoke of the “immoderate costly display” that grieved “virtue-loving persons.”¹⁴

A closely associated discourse concerned gender. Some laws, especially in Italy, were laden with the misogynist rhetoric of the age. As the priors of Florence’s *Officiale della donna* set out to “dress women down,” to employ Ronald Rainy’s felicitous phrase, they charged women with “barbarous and irrepressible bestiality” and a “reprobate and diabolical

Smallott (Baltimore, 1977), Chapter 1. For a general discussion of the history of ideas about luxury’s dangers (and benefits), see Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger, “The Rise and Fall of the Luxury Debates,” in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires, and Delectable Goods*, eds. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Hampshire, UK, 2003). Also see Hans Baron’s argument that Bruni’s translation of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Economics*, which defended the role of wealth in public life, challenged the old argument about poverty’s virtue and gave early form to an argument about the social usefulness of commerce: Hans Baron, “Franciscan Poverty and Civic Wealth in Humanistic Thought,” *Speculum* 13 (1938), pp. 1–37, and, more generally, Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought*, p. 52. The debate about luxury would continue for centuries and in the eighteenth century entered French political discourse with a vengeance. For this discussion, see John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 2006), esp. Chapter 1.

¹² As a seventeenth-century French legislator put it in making the traditional argument for consumption by elites, “this splendor . . . is necessary to uphold the dignity of their [the nobility’s] birth, to impress upon the people the respect [due them], and to maintain business and the arts”: Nicolas Delamare, *Traité de la police* (Paris, 1713–38), Vol. 1, p. 413; cited in Michèle Fogel, “Modèle d’état et modèle social de dépense: Les lois somptuaires en France de 1485 à 1660,” in *Genèse de l’état moderne Prélèvement et redistribution*, eds. J. Ph. Genet and M. Le Mené (Paris, 1987), p. 228.

¹³ Scattergood, “Fashion and Morality,” p. 263.

¹⁴ For the Nuremberg material, see Kent Roberts Greenfield, *Sumptuary Law in Nürnberg: A Study in Paternal Government* (Baltimore, 1918), p. 127.



Figure 10. *Bosoms*.

Lucas Cranach the Elder, *Portrait of a Young Woman* (c. 1530). Oil on wood, 42 × 29 cm. Florence, Uffizi. Photo Credit: Alinari / Art Resource, NY.

nature." Accordingly, they claimed, women used "honeyed poison" to trick their husbands into buying them more finery.¹⁵ More generalized concerns about the sexualized body also made an appearance. An ordinance from Strasbourg in 1370 banned corsets that "pushed up the bosom."¹⁶ Men's bodies were also under surveillance. A Heidelberg

¹⁵ In Ronald Rainey, "Dressing down the Dressed-Up," p. 232. Also see Ronald Rainey, "Sumptuary Legislation in Renaissance Florence."

¹⁶ Veronika Bauer, "Korsettähnlichen Unterkleidern, die den Busen hohen," in *Kleiderordnungen*, ed. Bauer, p. 3. Others from the Germanic area sought to ensure that peasant women's skirts were long enough: Bauer, *Kleiderordnungen*, pp. 3,

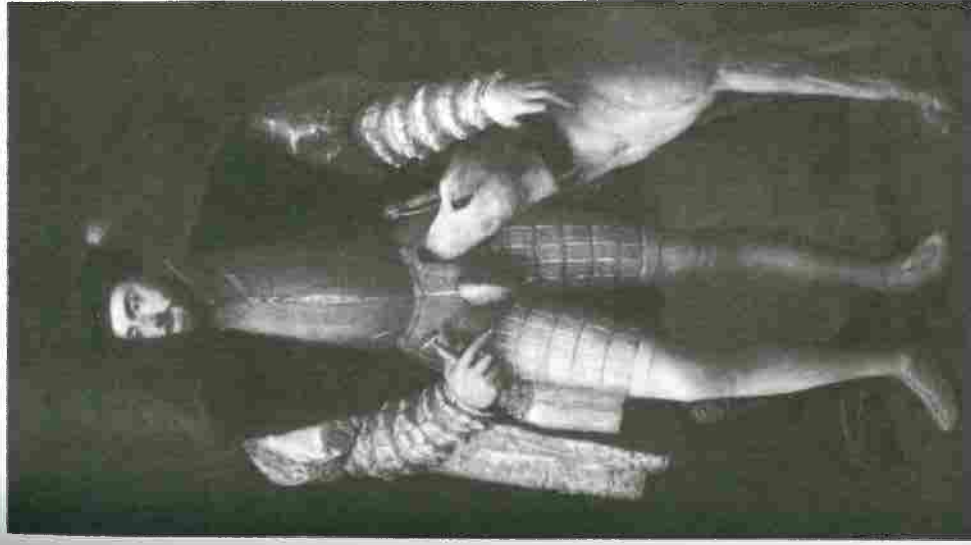


Figure 11. *Male Anatomy*.

Titian, *Portrait of Charles V* (1533). Oil on canvas, 192 × 111 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado. Photo Credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY.

police ordinance from 1465 set minimum lengths for men's jackets, and one from the same period in Nuremberg ordered that a man's coat "not

40-50, 65-6; also see Greenfield, *Sumptuary Law in Nürnberg*, p. 114. The worry about women's modesty was not confined to German-speaking areas. In the 1470s, the Florentine commune commanded that a widow not expose her breasts: for this see Isabelle Chabot, "La sposa in nero: La ritualizzazione del lutto delle vedove fiorentine (secoli XIV-XV)," *Quaderni storici* 86, no. 2 (August 1994), pp. 421-62; cited in Frick, *Dressing*, p. 90.

be cut out too deeply, or be left open, in order that everyone's shame may be covered, and he may not be found unchaste therewith."¹⁷

Some of the texts took another approach as well, claiming that lavish spending brought economic ruin, thus implicitly equating sober dress with economic prudence.¹⁸ English royal legislation of 1363 ranted about "the outrageous excessive apparel of divers people, against their estate and degree, to the great destruction and impoverishment of all the land."¹⁹ A law issued in Bavaria in 1599 complained that nobles spent so much on their weddings that the debts burdened heirs for years afterward.²⁰ Many of these laws had a distinctly mercantilist cast, for they targeted imported goods and seemed to equate such purchases with bad citizenship, even with treason. For example, an English ordinance of 1463 accused those who wore "excessive and inordinate array and apparel" of "impoverishing . . . the realm of England and . . . enriching . . . other strange realms and countries to the final destruction of the husbandry of this fair realm."²¹ A Strasbourg regulation of 1600 attacked "clothing from foreign, non-German nations" that had little of "the commendable steadfastness for which our old German forefathers had a singular reputation in other things as well as in clothing."²² Florentine ordinances of the fifteenth century banned necklines "in the French

¹⁷ Greenfield, *Sumptuary Law in Nürnberg*, p. 115; also see Lyndal Roper, "Blood and Codpieces: Masculinity in the Early Modern German Town" in *idem*, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1994), pp. 107–25.

¹⁸ Hunt, *Governance*, pp. 207–8.

¹⁹ *Statutes of the Realm* I, pp. 280–1, cited in Scattergood, "Fashion and Morality," p. 260. An Act of 1509–10 repeated the litaney: "The greate and costly array and apparel used within this realme . . . hathe be the occasion of grete impoverishing of divers of the kinges subjectes": Scattergood, "Fashion and Morality," p. 262.

²⁰ Baur, *Kleiderordnungen*, p. 122.

²¹ Scattergood, "Fashion and Morality," p. 261. Another English law in effect between 1571 and 1597 required that all nongentry men wear an English-made wool cap on Sundays and holy days: Harte, "State Control," p. 138.

²² John Martin Vincent, *Costume and Conduct in the Laws of Basel, Bern, and Zurich, 1370–1800* (Baltimore, 1935), pp. 68–9. Similarly, a Bavarian text from 1616 spoke of the "reason why more money flows out of than into our land": Baur, *Kleiderordnungen in Bayern*, pp. 122–3.

style" or saddle-shaped headgear "in the Flemish or French style."²³ A 1543 French law denounced "excessive and superfluous expense on cloth and ornaments of gold and silver . . . the means by which huge sums of money are sucked from the realm," which permits foreigners to "enrich themselves from the fat of our realm and give aid to our enemies."²⁴

Alone or together, however, these justifications do not sufficiently explain why dress was singled out above almost all other forms of consumption or exactly what it was about dress that so disturbed legislators of the day. The critique of luxury was a centuries-old script, and late medieval sumptuary legislation's only contribution to the rhetoric was a specific focus on dress rather than more generally on "excess."²⁵ Women's vanity, their passion for personal adornment, their frivolity, and wastefulness — these too were all old canards, tired tropes that had circulated in every decade of western European history.²⁶ In any case, in

²³ In Rainey, "Dressing down the Dressed-Up," p. 219, notes 8 and 9.

²⁴ "L'excessive et superflue dépense en draps et ornemens d'or et d'argent . . . le moyen de quoy grandes sommes de deniers se tirent de cestuy royaume," which permit foreigners to "d'eux enrichir de la graisse de notre royaume . . . [and] d'en pouvoir ayder auxdits ennemis" ("the excessive and superfluous expense for cloth and ornaments of gold and silver . . . the means by which huge sums of pennies are pulled from this realm," which permit foreigners to "enrich themselves from the fat of our realm . . . and makes it possible to aid our enemies with it"): in Delamare, *Traité de la police*, Vol. I, p. 418; cited in Fogel, "Modèle d'état," p. 231.

²⁵ Claire Sponsler points out that the discourse on "luxury" provides no measure of what is enough, what is too much, or what kind of goods constitute the "excess" or particularly feed vanity. Instead of attacks on luxury, she argues, these regulations were "clothing laws," not sumptuary legislation or attacks on generic consumption, and the laws should be read as "narratives responding to pressing social needs by sketching out a vision of a society ordered in a particular way": Claire Sponsler, "Narrating the Social Order: Medieval Clothing Laws," *CLIO* 21 (1992), pp. 265–83, p. 269. For more on arguments about the equation between social ordering and dress, see pp. 220–26 following.

²⁶ For a discussion of how the misogynist text worked and how it circulated in medieval culture, see Howard R. Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago, 1991). The notions about women's frivolity and lust for finery seem to have infected modern scholarship as well. For one example from the nineteenth century, see Henri Baudrillart, *Histoire du Luxe Privé et Public depuis l'antiquité jusqu'à nos jours*, Vol. 3, *Le Moyen âge et la*



Figure 12. *Male Elegance.*

Hans Holbein the Younger, *Portrait of Henry VIII of England* (1540). Oil on panel, 75 × 89 cm. Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica. Photo Credit: Scala/Ministero per i Beni e le Attività culturali / Art Resource, NY.

this age men were every bit as devoted to extravagant dress as women were. Indeed, most laws showed more concern with men's dress than with women's.²⁷

Renaissance, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1881), p. 251. "It is only too often in the history of luxury that we have cause to regret the deplorable influence exercised by women": cited in Heller, "Sumptuary Law," p. 336.

²⁷ For example, in Renaissance Florence, men were in fact as richly dressed as women, and they often took charge in ordering and designing the costumes worn by their wives and daughters: Frick, *Dressing*, esp. pp. 215–19. Duke Philip the Bold of Burgundy spent between 15,000 and 20,000 francs per year on silks, wools, furs, and luxury cloths of other materials for his own wardrobe: A. van Nieuwenhuysen, *Les finances du duc de Bourgogne*, pp. 394–5. René d'Anjou's budget for clothing and apparel was twice his queen's: Françoise Pignonier, *Costume et vie sociale: la cour d'Anjou, XIVe – XVe siècle* (Paris, 1970), pp. 97–105. Harte, "State Control," emphasizes that the "labyrinthine control

A 1483 English act, for example, included women in only two of seven targeted groups, almost as afterthoughts. The wife, mother, or sisters of the king (who were permitted cloth of gold, silk, or the color purple) were named in the first group, and the last of the seven included the wives of servants of husbandry, of common laborers, and of servants to artificers outside any city or borough.²⁸

Laced throughout much of the legislation was the even more specific complaint that people were dressing above their station, and scholars have generally agreed that this was the legislation's fundamental impetus. Lawmakers were struggling to reestablish a traditional equation between luxurious dress and rank in response to the new abundance of luxury goods and the rise of new social classes now able to participate in luxury consumption. As they ruled that the wife of a simple artisan in Bologna could wear only crimson sleeves, whereas a woman married to a notary could own sleeves of gold, or that an English lord could wear purple silk but a commoner could not, lawmakers implicitly assumed that the cut of a costume, the materials from which it was made, the decorations it bore, and even its color signified social place.²⁹ In late medieval England, Claire Sponsler argues, it was thought that "clothing

over both fashions and fabrics was aimed more at men than at women" and notes that "men were the more brightly and elaborately dressed of the sexes," p. 143.

²⁸ Sponsler, "Narrating," p. 279. Women made no other appearance in the legislation, however, and the clothing they were allowed was described only cursorily. In contrast, some English laws described men's clothing in excruciating detail. For example, an especially odd Proclamation of 1561 took on men's trousers (*hosen*): "no Taylour, Hosiet, or other person . . . shall put any more cloth in any one payre of hosen for the outside, then one yarde and a halfe, or the moste, one yeaerde and three quarters of a yeaerde of karsey or any other cloth, lether, or any other kinde of stuffe above at quantitie . . . Neyther any man under the degree of a Baron, to weare within his hosen any velvet, Sattin, or any other stuffe above the estimation of Sarcenet, or Taffata". Willfred Hooper, "Tudor Sumptuary Laws," *English Historical Review* 30:119 (July 1915): pp. 433–49, p. 440.

²⁹ A 1474 law from Bologna was similarly worried about women's sleeves. It reserved gold gowns for the daughters and wives of knights, sleeves of gold for those of notaries and bankers, crimson dresses for the wives and daughters of artisans in the senior guilds, but only crimson sleeves for women whose fathers or husbands were in humbler trades. From Diane Owen Hughes, "Sumptuary



Figure 13. *Merchant Splendor.*

Hans Holbein the Younger, *Portrait of a Young Merchant*, probably the Nuremberg patrician Hans von Muffel (1541). Oil on canvas, 47 × 35 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

could actively *produce* status, not just passively reflect it.³⁰ A Venetian diarist of the early sixteenth century put it directly: the city suffered “because . . . everyone is wearing robes of dogal sleeves, those which were first worn by the Doge and doctors alone.”³¹ Even merchants, practitioners of a trade once condemned in moralist legislation, could wear elegant clothing and proudly display it.

Laws and Social Relations in Renaissance Italy,” in *Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West*, ed. John Bossy (Cambridge, UK, 1983).

³⁰ Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance: Bodies, Goods, and Theatricality in Late Medieval England* (Minneapolis, 1997) p. 13. For a general discussion (and endorsement) of this interpretation, see Van Uytven, “Showing off One’s Rank,” pp. 19–34.

³¹ Cited in Welch, “New, Old, and Secondhand Clothing,” p. 101.

However, even a superficial survey of a wide range of European legislation reveals that more than rank was at stake. For example, the laws from Florence described at the beginning of this chapter said nothing at all about rank, focusing instead simply on banning (and taxing) any use, by any woman at all, of certain kinds of materials or decorations, often in astonishingly misogynist rhetoric. The town council of Braunschweig expressed no such venom, but it too seemed indifferent to rank. Its 1343 law was addressed to all “women, single and married, citizens and residents”; the aldermen of Zittau directed themselves in 1353 to “rich and poor” alike; in 1356 Speyer targeted “all our citizens and residents, men and women.”³²

Even those laws that sought to equate dress with social place seemed unable to decide what groups needed regulation or even how many and what kind of groups made up society. Some regulations, such as the thirteenth-century French ordinance cited earlier, concentrated exclusively on the ranks of the aristocracy, meticulously separating mere knights from greater lords, or princes of the blood from ordinary noblemen. Other regulations, even those issued by princes, ignored the aristocracy and sought instead to organize urban society into neatly delineated ranks.³³ Still others seemed to make no sense at all. For example, the *Fürstlichen Bayrischen Landsordnung* of 1578 identified seven social groups, but each of the groups was made up of odd combinations of people, and the entire list hardly described a recognizable version of early modern Germanic society. The first of the seven groups consisted of peasants and miscellaneous residents of the countryside; the fourth was made up of the “patricians” from what were labeled the four “capital cities” [sic]; the final group was composed of “servant girls.”³⁴ The lawmakers also seemed unable to decide what the relationship between luxury and social place should be. Although more expensive or especially rare materials were always reserved for those at the top of whatever hierarchy the law established, if it was just the rarity or the cost of an

³² See, for this evidence, Liselotte Constanze Eisenbart, *Kleiderordnungen der deutschen Städte zwischen 1350 und 1700: Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Bürgertums* (Göttingen, 1962), pp. 55 and passim.

³³ For this pattern, see Baur, *Kleiderordnungen*.

³⁴ Another law of 1599 designated only three groups – peasants, urban citizens, and nobles – whereas a third from 1604 thought there were thirteen groups: in Baur, *Kleiderordnungen*, pp. 27–8.

item that made it appropriate for aristocrats alone, then the legislation would have targeted a lot more than clothing. Horses, armor, residences, servants, tapestries, books, coin hoards, hollowware — all these things and more would have been included in the list of reserved goods.³⁵ Clearly, there was something special about dress, something that made its ability to display status especially worrisome.

A comparison of laws from different places confirms the impression that among European governors there was no consensus about what or who needed to be controlled. For example, a 1417 law from the southern French city of Carpentras fulminated about women's dress and devoted five of its twelve articles to weddings and funerals, whereas legislation from nearby Avignon issued in 1462 said almost nothing about either issue, concentrating instead on rank.³⁶ The English evidence, taken as a whole, betrayed an inordinate concern with social hierarchy, attempting to construct what one scholar has called "a scheme of social groups and a related scheme of restricted fabrics," but in that realm women's attire rarely got attention until the sixteenth century.³⁷ In contrast, in Italian cities, worries about rank appeared late in the law books, whereas women's dress took center stage.³⁸ Even in a single place, the content

³⁵ As Harte, "State Control," points out, English legislators (king and parliament) did turn their attention to other kinds of imported goods (calicoes and wine, for example) in the later years of the period, but they did not do so in the context of sumptuary legislation but by means of import taxes and other formal restraints of trade. To judge from this evidence, the "economic" argument against dress was reduced to an argument against imported dress materials and incorporated into a larger, more general mercantilist concern that targeted all imports. In that context, dress lost the specific cultural valence given it by sumptuary legislation.

³⁶ For Carpentras, see H. Chobaut, "Le règlement somptuaire de Carpentras (avril 1417)," *Annales d'Avignon et du comtat venaissin* 2 (1913), pp. 155-64; for Avignon, see René de Maulde. "Anciens textes de droit français inédits ou rarissimes: Coutumes et règlements de la République d'Avignon au XII^e siècle," *Nouvelle revue historique de droit français et étranger* 1-2 (1877-8), in installments throughout Vols. 1 and 2.

³⁷ Harte, "State Control." p. 136.

³⁸ James Brundage argues explicitly that "statutory regulation of women's dress flourished most profusely in Mediterranean Europe": Brundage, "Sumptuary Laws," p. 346; also see Rainey, "Dressing down the Dressed-Up," and Killierby, "Problems." The latter argues, however, that although the majority of laws were

and tone of sumptuary legislation frequently changed over time.³⁹ The earliest Bavarian laws, for example, were directed at cities and featured a discourse about the need for thrift; later ordinances attacked social climbing and sought to create social hierarchies; still later, more generally moralizing language took precedence, and laws against dress came to be embedded in fulminations against drink, gambling, prostitution, and swearing. French royal legislation between 1485 and 1583 fought to defend nobility against commoners and to reinforce hierarchy within the nobility; in contrast, laws from 1601 to 1660 sought only to restrict luxury to the court.⁴⁰

Legislators' apparent lack of agreement about how dress disturbed hierarchy and about the correct remedies for the disturbances suggests that the problem was not that dress upset a well-understood hierarchy. Their confusion reveals that legislators were uncertain about just what was the appropriate structure of society and, in fact, how rank itself was

directed against women's dress and ornamentation and although she found not a single prosecution of a man, misogyny as such was not the central concern of the authorities; it was, she suggests, luxury itself.

³⁹ For example, the English legislation, although always betraying acute anxiety about social order, shifted its focus from social group to social group and regularly redefined hierarchy itself. The legislation of 1363, for example, struggled mightily to relate urban groups and clerics to a traditional feudal and rural social order by setting income minimums. Merchants, citizens, burghesses, artificers, and handicraftsmen with incomes up to 500 pounds could, for example, dress in the manner of esquires and gentlemen with incomes of 100 pounds a year, whereas those with incomes of 1,000 pounds a year could dress as did esquires or gentlemen with income of 200 pounds per year; clerks with 200 marks per year could wear the same dress as knights with the same income. In contrast, the 1463 Act, although equally focused on the "rising" middle classes, presented a considerably more complex and almost incoherent social order, with many more categories; further, the act made almost no effort to relate one group to another by way of income. Just twenty years later, however, new legislation set forth another vision of social order, one that arranged aristocrats into a four-part hierarchy, lumped all male commoners into three ranked groups, making no distinction between rural and urban, and then finished with an odd category made up of "the wives and servants" of "artificers outside the city or borough." See Sponsler, "Narrating the Social Order," p. 279, for these details.

⁴⁰ For this argument, see Fogel, "Modèle d'état."

established.⁴¹ Alan Hunt came to the same conclusion in his survey of sumptuary laws from the period; he argued that dress was incoherently being mobilized to figure out how to place people, in effect to create known identities in a society that had become unrecognizable.⁴²

FASHION, COMMERCE, AND LAW

Dress could not solidify the identities of its wearers, however, because it was itself increasingly unstable. Clothing styles among Europe's elites had been changing rapidly since at least the twelfth century, exploding in variety and quantity as imported or European-made materials and styles became widely available. During the twelfth century, the male lay elite abandoned the short tunics and leggings that had for centuries been their usual dress, reverting to what historians of costume call the "long and draped" style. This style had been the aristocratic norm during the classical period, and it was already the standard garb of Europe's clergy, but only after about 1100 did it become the preferred dress of the lay aristocracy of both genders; once adopted, it would remain their formal dress for nearly two hundred years. Meanwhile, the short tunic and leggings would serve to identify ordinary men, whereas ordinary women would wear simple aprons and skirts that came to the calf.

The image here gives an idea of the long and draped style.

Some scholars consider this period, roughly the years between 1100 and 1300, the birthplace of European fashion, and if luxury and change

⁴¹ It seems that the supposed link between dress and status became so confused that some artists reverted to the old styles in depicting aristocrats. Rather than adorning them in the latest fashions of the day as painters and sculptors typically did, even anachronistically picturing seventh- or eighth-century people in fifteenth-century garb, some artists dressed them in flowing, almost unisex robes, as though to recall the age when rank was unquestioned – and could be literally represented in clothing. See Margaret McEnchroe Williams, "Dressing the Part: Depictions of Noble Costume in Irish High Crosses," in *Encountering Medieval Textiles and Dress: Objects, Texts, Images*, eds. Désirée Koslin and Janet Snyder (New York, 2002), pp. 45–63, p. 46; and Susan L'Engle, "Addressing the Law: Costume and Signifier in Medieval Legal Miniatures," in *ibid.* My thanks to Lauri Wilson for these references.

⁴² Hunt, *Governance*, esp. Chapter 6. Also, Eisenbart, *Kleiderordnungen*, pp. 58–60.

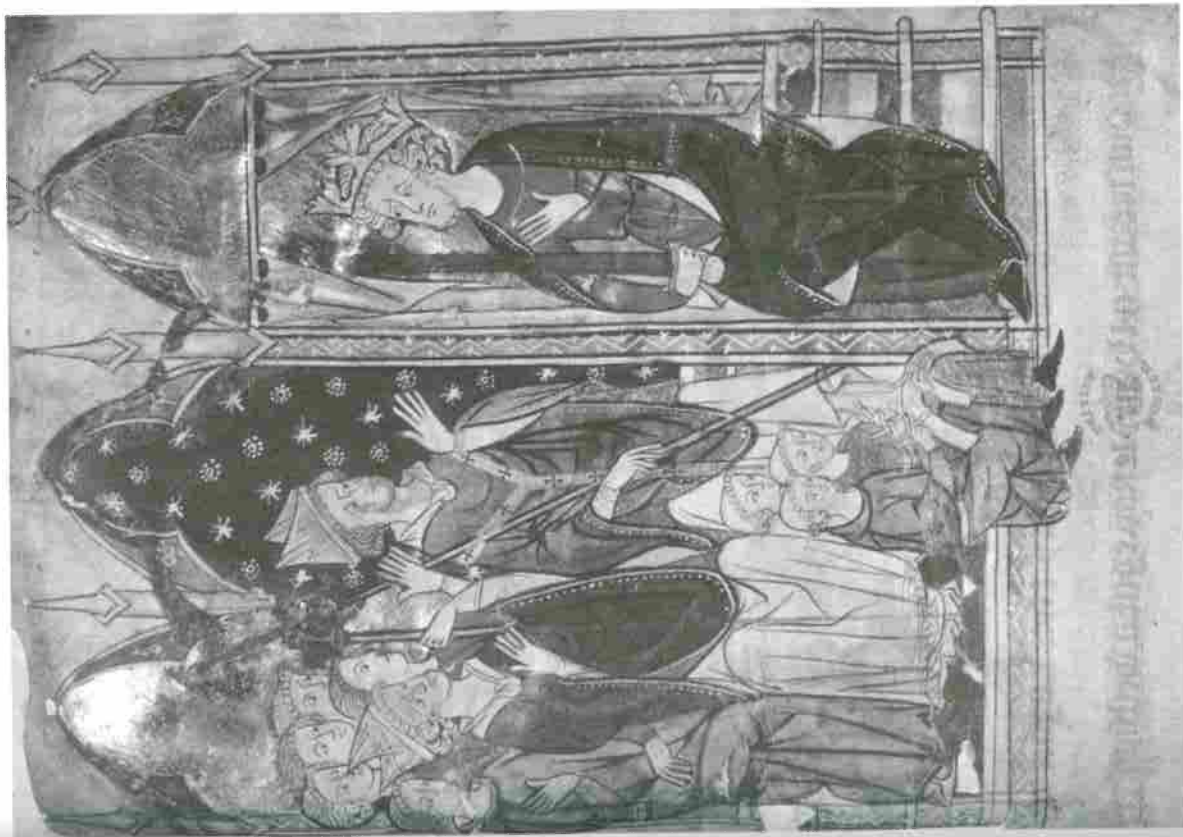


Figure 14. *The Long and Draped Style*. *King Edward I Hearing a Lawsuit* (late 13th century). London, British Library. Photo Credit: HIP / Art Resource, NY.

alone are the measure of fashion, they are probably correct. It was certainly then that miniatures like the one reproduced above began to lavish detail on dress and that the clergy began to complain vociferously about these “excesses.”⁴³ However, most historians date the birth of fashion to the fourteenth century, not to the twelfth, for it was then that Europeans saw even more dramatic stylistic innovation.⁴⁴ It was then that the “shaped and fitted” style emerged, and it was accompanied by an even faster change of fads, ever more decorations, ever more fantasy – all enabled by ever more skillful tailoring and the increasing availability of luxury fabrics and ornamentations.⁴⁵ By the fifteenth century the changes were unmistakable; by the sixteenth, they were out of control.

However, fashion is not just about style, although style is its ephemeral essence. It is about change and originality, and in this respect scholars who argue for a twelfth-century birth of fashion have a point. Fashion is not simply a way of making or wearing clothes, but a way of using clothing and fabrics that invites, indeed demands, constant

⁴³ For this argument, see Margaret Scott, *Medieval Dress and Fashion* (London, 2007), particularly Chapter 2.

⁴⁴ Francoise Pignonier, “Une révolution dans le costume masculine au XIV^e siècle,” in *Le vêtement. Histoire, archéologie et symbolique vestimentaire au Moyen Âge*, ed. Michel Pastoureau (Paris, 1989), pp. 225–41; Francoise Pignonier and Perrine Mane, *Se vêtir au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1995); Paul Post, “La naissance du costume masculine moderne au XIV^e siècle,” in *Acts du I^{er} Congrès international d’histoire du costume* (Milan, 1955), pp. 28–41; Francois Boucher, “Les conditions de l’apparition de costume court en France vers le milieu du XIV^e siècle,” in *Recueil de travaux offerts à M. Clovis Brunel* (Paris, 1955), pp. 183–92; Francois Boucher, 20,000 Years of Fashion: *The History of Costume and Personal Adornment* (New York, 1967); Odile Blanc, “From Battlefield to Court: The Invention of Fashion in the Fourteenth Century,” in *Encountering Medieval Textiles*, eds. Koslin and Snyder; Désirée G. Koslin, *Parades et Perures: L’invention du corps de mode à la fin du Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1997); Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits: The Evolution of Modern Dress* (New York, 1994); and Sarah-Grace Heller, *Fashion in Medieval France* (Rochester, NY, 2007). Also see Wilson, “La nouvelle manière.”

⁴⁵ As Jones and Stallybrass explain, in early modern London tailors were thought to construct, not just clothe, bodies and were maligned for their skill. For example, the authors quote one critic who charged that tailors were “Idol-makers” and “the diuels engineers” who “make the whole world with their new inuentions.” See Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (New York, 2000), p. 85.

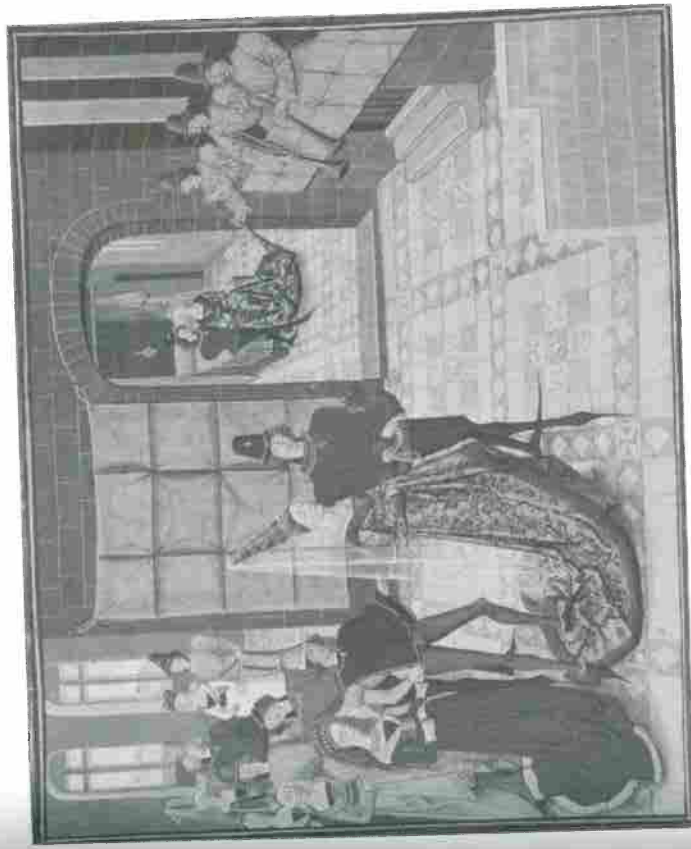


Figure 15. *The Shaped and Fitted Style, Fifteenth Century.* Loyset or Louis Liedet (c. 1460–78), *Marriage of Renaud and Clarissa (Wedding Procession)*, from “Renaud de Montauban.” Paris, Bibliothèque de l’Arsenal, Ms. 5073, fol. 117v. Photo Credit: Bridgeman-Giraudon / Art Resource, NY.

change, because “fashion” exists only as the new. “La mode, c’est ce qui démode,” as Jean Cocteau is said to have put it.⁴⁶ It has no specific content; there are no precise fabrics, materials, cuts, shapes, lengths, or ornaments that constitute fashion and no particular arrangement among the elements of dress. Fashion is nothing but rearrangement, a kind of nervous play with those elements, an endless conversation with previous arrangements and with onlookers. Although rigorously conventional in that it always exists in reference to a norm and in that it always elicits compliance, fashion is also transgressive in that it compulsively tests the boundaries of the expected.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ “Fashion is that which falls out of fashion.”

⁴⁷ Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress* (Manchester, UK, 1994) describes in some detail the shifting styles of medieval

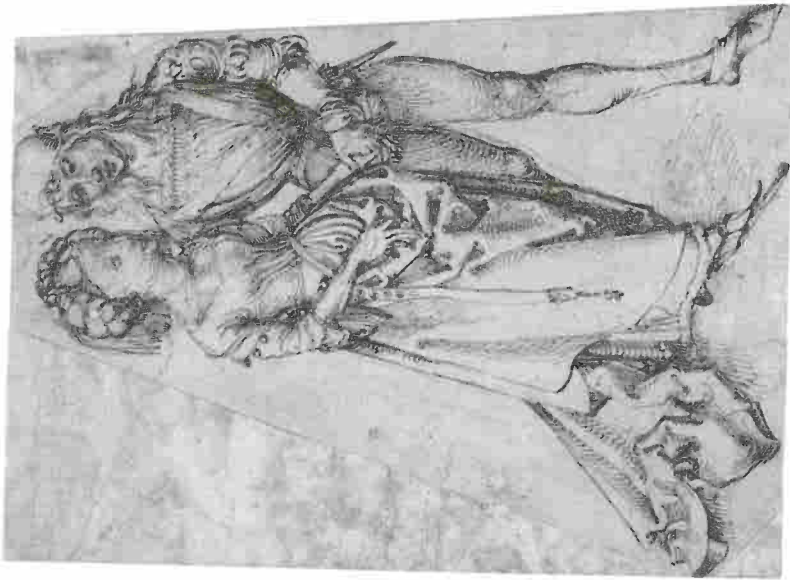


Figure 16. *The Shaped and Fitted Style, Sixteenth Century.* Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528), *Amorous Couple*. Pen and brown ink, 25.8 × 19.1 cm. Inv. 23918. Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle. Photo: Christoph Irrgang. Photo Credit: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, NY.

Countless laws from the period described fashion in exactly this way, always condemning the new and insisting on the old. In 1357, the city of Constance demanded that unmarried women crown their heads with wreaths (*Kränze*) only in the “old style.”⁴⁸ In 1420, the city of Ulm mandated that the sleeves of women’s dresses be no longer or wider than those women “used to have or wear” and that their coats be lined with silk only “in the original style.” An ordinance from Basel in 1637

aristocratic dress from about 1350 forward, emphasizing the malleability of fashion even in these early years of its history (pp. 13–19 in particular).

⁴⁸ Eisenbart, *Kleiderordnungen*, p. 79.



Figure 17. *Aged Bosoms.*

Quentin Metsys, *A Grotesque Old Woman* (c. 1525–30). Oil on oak, 64.1 × 45.4 cm. Bequeathed by Miss Jenny Louise Roberta Blaker, 1947 (NG5769). London, National Gallery. © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY.

forbade men the “recently arrived filthy long *alla mode* breeches.”⁴⁹ In 1660, the city of Strasbourg prefaced a meticulous clothing ordinance by condemning “the improper, luxurious, trifling, indecent things . . . new in clothing from foreign, non-German nations.”⁵⁰ Fashion thus sped what was already in motion, making cloth and clothing an ever hotter spot in an already heated economic culture precisely because it accelerated change, increased the circulation of dress materials and styles,

⁴⁹ Vincent, *Costume and Conduct*, pp. 56–7.

⁵⁰ Vincent, *Costume and Conduct*, pp. 68–9.

and inspired creativity in workshops where cloth was produced and costumes designed.⁵¹

The new clothing also created a dramatic gender dimorphism in a way that the old, loose draperies had not. The new fashions drew attention to the buttocks, chest, legs, and even the genitals of men and to the necks, shoulders, breasts, and bellies of women, inciting the attacks on "immodest" fashions that have already been described. For example, along with the Strasbourg ordinance about women's bosoms mentioned earlier, we have laws from Speyer banning décolletage and one from Florence telling women not to show their breasts.⁵² And we have extraordinarily nasty pictures like the image reproduced here, which mocks an old woman who seems to think that breasts can substitute for youth and beauty.

There is no doubt that Europe's expanding commercial culture was both the precondition for fashion's emergence and the source of its dangers. Commerce brought new fabrics and materials to Europe, exposing Europeans to styles from Mediterranean and Eastern cultures and creating the institutions necessary for the easy circulation of goods, people, and modes of dress. It encouraged merchants and artisans in Flanders and elsewhere to invent new weaves and new dyeing techniques; it gave birth to skilled tailors who could cut a doublet, trim a sleeve, and transform a gown. It also produced new riches and a newly rich urban class of merchants who dressed themselves in their own wares, adorning themselves as once only landed aristocrats could have.

Still worse, with abundance and variety came choice, and with choice came anxieties about the quality of one's choice. As velvets, silks, furs, woolsens, trimmings, and jeweled ornamentations multiplied in quantity and kind, individuals had to decide which velvet, which fur, which jewel to select. The choice was increasingly difficult — what colors spoke most clearly, what drape best flattered, what flourish was the most exotic, what decoration the loveliest? Thus was born the problem of

⁵¹ This argument is made with particular force by Sponsler, "Narrating," pp. 265-83.

⁵² For more examples of regulations concerning both men's and women's modesty in dress, see Baur, *Kleiderordnungen in Bayern*, pp. 3, 40-50, 65-6; Greenfield, *Sumptuary Law in Nürnberg*, p. 114; Roper, "Blood and Codpieces"; and Chabot, "La sponsa in nero," p. 86-2.

"taste," the cultural marker that distinguished those who knew how to use wealth from those who did not. As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, when culture can be bought and sold and made available to anyone, taste or the ability to choose "well" becomes an essential social skill.⁵³ Taste implies competition, differentiation, and rankings; it necessarily pits individuals and groups against one another in contests of aesthetic judgment.

However, there is more to ponder about the links between clothing and sumptuary legislation, for much of the legislation was not, in fact, focused on fashion but quite simply on clothing itself. Some laws from the thirteenth and early fourteenth century betray no concern with style or cut and no real sense that clothing is fashion. For the French crown issuing its thirteenth-century clothing ordinances, for example, the problem was the cost and color of *robes* and the opulence of banquets, just as it was for the English crown when it issued its first ordinances some fifty years later. How the clothing was cut, worn, or styled was not at issue. Even as we move later in time and sumptuary legislation more often takes up the question of style and cut, we still find the original concern with price, kind, and color. For example, a fourteenth-century ordinance from Nuremberg demanded that women citizens of any age

⁵³ Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction: Critique sociale du jugement* (Paris, 1979) [in English: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA, 1984)]. It also is the justification for luxury spending, for taste would come to sanction the material desires of Europe's emergent bourgeoisie. Historians typically argue that the eighteenth century gave birth to the modern idea of taste as a signifier of class. It is no accident, they further argue, that this period also reworked the critique of luxury, coming to see the desire for luxuries as a source of social good, because it fueled commerce and promoted sociability. In that discourse, luxury was disruptive only when available to those unable to manage wealth well (i.e., the poor and the ordinary, those without "taste"). Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (London, 1714) is the seminal text; also see Berg and Eger, "The Rise and Fall of the Luxury Debates," Edward Hundert, "Mandeville, Rousseau and the Political Economy of Fantasy," and Dana Goodman, "Furnishing Discourses: Readings of a Writing Desk in Eighteenth-century France," all in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Berg and Eger. Also see Christopher Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, UK, 1994).

or status not wear a veil or headdress that allowed the "ends in front [to] lie upon the head," a reference to a new style of coif; at the same time, however, the law forbade women to wear garments of silk, Roman jackets, or garments trimmed with zendal (a kind of silk), gold, or silver, thus repeating the kind of restrictions issued a century before.⁵⁴

THE BODY POLITIC ON DISPLAY

Although it is clear that commerce set off the explosion of sumptuary legislation and motivated its obsession with dress, it is not quite clear why it did. As we have seen, the issuers of such legislation offered an unstable mix of explanations, and historians have more or less taken them at their word, giving special credit to the idea that the new availability of luxurious clothing disrupted existing social hierarchies. Questions remain, however. What cultural logic so tightly linked dress not only to one's rank but also to one's person — to appropriate gender identity, to moral restraint, to economic prudence? Why did governments think it was their job to preserve that logic? What principle or principles of good government were they enacting?

In his 1918 study of Nuremberg's sumptuary laws, Kent Greenfield sought to answer these questions by turning our attention from the people who were under surveillance and looking instead at the issuers. He concluded that sumptuary laws were an expression of new ideas about government; as he put it, "the state was responsible not only for the enforcement of thrift and industry, but as well for the economy and the conformity of moral standards of family life of every person under its care."⁵⁵ The preamble to an ordinance from Nuremberg expressed

⁵⁴ Greenfield, *Sumptuary Law in Nürnberg*, p. 108.

⁵⁵ Greenfield, *Sumptuary Law in Nürnberg*, p. 9. Greenfield's "paternalist" state is often labeled the "police state," in the early modern sense of the term. As Karl Bosl put it, "[Good policing] always implies the good ordering of city, commune, etc. and includes safety and cleanliness, but also customs and religion, that is policing includes and furthers the good of civil society, whatever in city and land serves good order. Today one could almost otherwise formulate policing as ordering": Karl Bosl, "Die Polizei: Ihre Entwicklung im modernen

the notion even more forcefully. The council, the document reported, was empowered by "the Almighty God . . . [to extricate] pride, folly and superfluous expenditure." According to Greenfield, the councilmen were consequently authorized to regulate "the manner and cost of weddings, funerals, christenings and clothes . . . because dress was an integral part of the moral order."⁵⁶ Maximilian I's *Landsordnung* of 1599 was more explicit still: "it is our most earnest duty to arrange each subject, servant, dependent and related persons in his proper station, without excess and disorder that dishonors, and to dress them as was the custom of the past in our realm."⁵⁷ The Germanic governments were not alone in positioning themselves as moral arbiters. Throughout this age, both local and regional governments defined themselves as custodians of the good society.

All these legislators agreed that the good society put in their care was one in which people dressed appropriately, but it is less obvious why they thought so. After all, no prince of earlier centuries would have considered it his job to regulate the dress of butchers or even to divide the entire aristocracy into ranks according to their costume, and he certainly would not have worried too much about his subjects' morals unless that meant their obedience to him. Implicitly following the lead of Greenfield, Neithard Bulst has given us the fullest response to this question by situating the legislation in the social and political history of the age, especially in the Germanic territories on which his research has been concentrated. He has argued that governments in this age of state building derived authority not so much from hereditary right or arms themselves (although they often claimed both), but from their ability to produce a good society. Over the some four hundred years of legislation that Bulst considered, however, the content of those

Staat und in der modernen Gesellschaft," in *Polizei in Bayern* 14 (1971), pp. 1-4, cited in Baur, *Kleiderordnungen in Bayern*, p. 159. On the early modern moralizing state, also see, for example, Marc Raef, *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600-1800* (New Haven, 1983); Gerhard Oestreich, *Neostoicism and the Early Modern State* (Cambridge, UK, 1982); and Greenfield, *Sumptuary Law in Nürnberg*.

⁵⁶ Greenfield, *Sumptuary Law in Nürnberg*, p. 109.

⁵⁷ Baur, *Kleiderordnungen in Bayern*, pp. 27-8.

laws changed as the social and political landscape itself shifted. The first wave of sumptuary laws, which began after the Black Death in the middle of the fourteenth century, tended to be directed at the entire urban population and sought to establish moral and social order in the face of the demographic and physic devastations wrought by the plague. Dress was a key part of the moral order that required restitution, but the rules that cities sought to impose were generally unspecific. The legislation was laced with vague attacks on *Kosbarkeit*, *Hoffart*, *Übermut*, *Übermass*, and *Masslosigkeit*, (costliness, pride, arrogance, excess, self-indulgence), alongside appeals to the *gemeiner Nutzen* (common benefit). In contrast, during what Bulst considers the second and third phases, legislators made a concentrated effort to define rank by means of dress, in response to the growing fear that hierarchy itself was endangered. What particularly marked the third phase, which began in the sixteenth century, was the entrance of the territorial state into the picture and the relative decline of urban legislation. In effect, the central state replaced the city and in doing so claimed for itself the right not only to define rank (and collect the fines by prosecuting infractions of the laws) but also to “police” the society; that is, to produce a “good” society.

Although the chronological pattern Bulst described does not seem to fit Italy or England as neatly as it does the Germanic regions, much less areas like the Low Countries where the legislation seems to have been much sparser, his general point holds: sumptuary legislation was a form of what others have called “governmentality”: a way public authorities constituted themselves. Dress was so obsessively targeted because when safely controlled, it seemed to guarantee the good society: not only to signal rank and thus secure social hierarchy but also to stabilize gender roles, assure appropriate sexuality, encourage fiscal restraint, and repress pride, medieval Europe’s premier sin. Other scholars have offered similar arguments. For example, Diane Owen Hughes has proposed that the sumptuary laws of fourteenth-century Florence principally served to differentiate among, and hence to control, a mobile, unstable, and featureless mass of residents who jostled against one another in a single undifferentiated civic space.⁵⁸ In the same vein, Alan Hunt has claimed

⁵⁸ According to Hughes, it was only later, with the aristocratization of Italian urban societies, that concerns with rank in the English sense took center

that sumptuary laws of this period were an effort to make people “recognizable” to one another in cities dangerously crowded with transients, newcomers, and upstarts.⁵⁹

The attacks on women that laced so much Italian legislation served a similar purpose, but not because women, qua women, were considered threats to social order. Rather, they served as the mark of that disorder. In the Florentine case, Hughes pointed out, women’s clothes were said to have so increased the cost of marriage that men were driven “to sodomy and women into convents.” She concluded that women were being scapegoated to atone for the spending on luxuries that seemed to violate moral codes, but was nevertheless indispensable in a city that lived from trade in such goods.⁶⁰ Carole Frick has argued that Florentine men used sumptuary legislation in much the same way. Although they dressed their wives and daughters in luxurious, even ostentatious, gowns for public display, they reserved for themselves the “old,” more conservative (if nevertheless costly) dress for these rituals in order to evoke the republican traditions of the city. Simultaneously, however, they issued laws castigating women for vanity and greed, thus managing both to display their wealth and take the moral high ground by sequestering themselves from the charge of vanity, falseness, and extravagance.⁶¹

stage: Hughes, “Sumptuary Laws and Social Relations.” Gerhard Jaritz makes a similar argument in “Kleidung und Prestige-Konkurrenz: Unterschiedliche Identitäten in der städtischen Gesellschaft unter Normierungszwängen,” in *Zwischen Sein und Schein: Kleidung und Identität in der ständischen Gesellschaft*, eds. Neithard Bulst and Robert Jütte (Munich, 1993), pp. 8–32. He reasons that the object of sumptuary regulation was not simply to rank society, but to differentiate among members of an increasingly unsettled social order; rank was just one of many axes of differentiation, although one that perhaps best satisfied the cultural impulse to ensure stability.

⁵⁹ Hunt, *Governance* and his discussion of “recognizability.”

⁶⁰ Hughes, “Distinguishing Signs,” pp. 3–59, pp. 37–38. Ronald Rainey noted that San Bernardino’s charge that “thousands of young men . . . would take wives if it were not for the fact that they had to spend the entire dowry, and sometimes even more, in order to dress the women,” provided lawmakers a convenient explanation for men’s bankruptcies, for sodomy, and for the population decline that they attributed to male celibacy: San Bernardino, *La Prediche*, 1:246, cited in Rainey, “Dressing down the Dressed-Up,” pp. 233–4.

⁶¹ Frick, *Dressing*.

Sumptuary legislation's focus on public celebrations like weddings and funerals can be explained according to the same logic: the laws were efforts to define and empower the state by suppressing alternative or competing sites of public power. Elaborate funerals, christenings, or weddings, if organized by families as gatherings of the clan, were ritualized assertions of power, times when the lineage showed off its wealth and numbers. For the nascent states of the day, whether city-state or territorial court, that display was a threat because their own legitimacy derived in part from precisely the same kind of performances. This was the age of the "theater state," the period in western history when both princes and magistrates constituted themselves in large part with elaborate and stylized displays of themselves and their entourages.⁶² Even the most powerful rulers of the day had no standing armies; they had no regular source of revenues except from their private domains and were heavily dependent on loans, extraordinary levies, and "voluntary" gifts from subordinates. Such rulers, even kings and dukes, and certainly the aldermen in cities who frequently had to compete with rich clans for control of urban space, had good reason to fear these gatherings. In effect, a splendid and costly "family" wedding was no private event: it was an implicit political challenge.⁶³ No wonder that the earliest wedding

⁶² On the theater state, see in particular Peter Arnade, *Realms of Ritual: Burgundian Ceremony and Civic Life in Late Medieval Cities* (Ithaca, NY, 1996) and his "City, State, and Public Ritual in the Late-Medieval Burgundian Netherlands," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 39, no. 2 (April 1997), pp. 300-18; also see David Nicholas, "In the Pit of the Burgundian Theater State: Urban Traditions and Princely Ambitions in Ghent, 1360-1420," *City and Spectacle in Medieval Europe*, in eds. Barbara A. Hanawalt and Katherine I. Reyerson (Minneapolis, 1994), pp. 271-95; Elodie Lecuppre-Desjardin, *La ville des cérémonies*; and D. Cannadine and S. Price, eds., *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremony in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, UK 1987). Recent work on the gifts demanded from political subordinates in celebration of royal weddings and christenings illustrates another aspect of this history, for it shows the state's effort to monopolize such pageants, making them their own. See Werner Paravicini, "Introduction," in idem, ed., *Les invitations*.

On family clans and their threat to centralizing governments, see in general Jacques Heers, *Family Clans in the Middle Ages: A Study of Political and Social Structures in Urban Areas*, trans. Barry Herbert (Amsterdam, 1977).

⁶³ Peter Goodrich has made a similar argument. In his interpretation, in the early modern period sumptuary rules served nascent states as essential tools

regulations from Nuremberg forbade "open" weddings and that the city's compendious *Hochzeitsbüchlein* of 1485, although conceding some ground on the issue of a wedding's size, nevertheless limited the guest list to family and out-of-town friends.⁶⁴ It was not just the "expenses" of the wedding or the "ostentation" of the funeral alone that so concerned legislators, although that was the righteous rhetoric used to restrict the displays. Rather, it was the families' show of force, which rulers had good reason to see as considerably more than mere show.⁶⁵

Given the importance of dress in any such public performance, it is no surprise that laws targeting these events regularly included regulations about dress.⁶⁶ From early modern Bavaria, for example, regulations about mourning dress, wedding clothes, and the apparel considered appropriate for christenings were systematically integrated into rules about the number of guests, the amount of food and wine, or the gifts exchanged at these events.⁶⁷ Similarly, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Basel and Zurich carefully wrote dress restrictions into the

of public identity. "Custom and costume . . . governed the forms of professional and political community and depended upon a comparable manipulation of signs as the mechanism for instituting both the legitimacy and the love of law. . . . The history of sumptuary law is best understood as the narrative of a marginal jurisdiction that was rapidly incorporated into the sovereign and centralizing apparatus of early modern law": Peter Goodrich, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Community, Identity, and A History of Sumptuary Law," *Law and Social Inquiry* 23, no. 3 (1998), pp. 707-28, pp. 722-3.

⁶⁴ Greenfield, *Sumptuary Law in Nürnberg*, p. 38.

⁶⁵ In this regard it is surely significant that in Florence regulations against dress were not enforced during communal celebrations; in those instances the citizenry was enacting the commune, not their own political identity. For this evidence, see Frick, *Dressing*, pp. 170-80.

⁶⁶ Even the more general "police" laws, which so often included clothing ordinances, put dress at the top of their list - if not in the legislation itself, then in the energy with which infractions were prosecuted. For example, in 1681 in Bern, 133 of 289 cases brought before the *Chorgericht* concerned dress: Vincent, *Costume and Conduct*, p. 104. Bavarian legislation in particular embedded dress in laws generally intended to reform public morals. On this pattern, see Baur, *Kleiderordnungen in Bayern*, pp. 21 and passim.

⁶⁷ Baur, *Kleiderordnungen in Bayern*, pp. 69-76; the same combination appears regularly in Swiss ordinances from the period: Vincent, *Costume and Conduct*.

clauses of their so-called wedding laws.⁶⁸ A Florentine ordinance of 1349 attacked banquets, women's dress, and weddings, funerals, and christenings just as vigorously as it did counterfeiting, carrying weapons, and breaking the curfew.⁶⁹ The same city treated mourning dress as a central feature of funerals, in 1473 allowing only one adult woman from the family of the deceased to wear "deep mourning."⁷⁰

Carole Frick has directly commented on the cultural logic that connected dress and such celebrations. She wrote, "Even in mourning and death, clothes were either designed to send or inadvertently sent a powerful message to the living. It was this power that the communal sumptuary laws sought to control and channel."⁷¹ Implicitly making the same argument, the Florentine humanist Leon Battista Alberti specifically linked clothes with honor, the quintessential public "good" in this age: "It is thus necessary that virtue should be supplemented by the goods of fortune. Virtue ought to be dressed in those seemly ornaments . . . we want to have beautiful clothes. . . they do us honor."⁷² For this reason, Frick concluded, rich Florentines invested as much as 40 percent of their assets in clothing and jewels worn exclusively for public performances, specifically for holidays, taking up or executing the duties of high office, and rites of passage such as weddings and funerals.⁷³

⁶⁸ Vincent, *Costume and Conduct*, p. 156.

⁶⁹ In Rainey, "Dressing down the Dressed-Up," p. 222. As Catherine Killeby put it, there were "very few aspects of the private and public customs, habits and dress of their citizens with which Italian lawmakers did not concern themselves.": Killeby, "Problems," p. 99.

⁷⁰ Frick, *Dressing*, p. 90.

⁷¹ Frick, *Dressing*, p. 86. Elsewhere, "riches made virtù visible and honor was the result. . . . Dress was controlled and manipulated by the males of the merchant elite to attain and retain power": Frick, *Dressing*, pp. 218 and 77–80. Sumptuary legislation rarely expressed interest in any clothing but that worn publicly, and even when banning possession rather than display itself, the laws attacked garments that were typically worn only in public. The few exceptions seem to attempt to set standards for modesty and targeted corsets, underskirts, and the like. On this point, also see Bulst, "Kleidung," pp. 32–3.

⁷² Leon Battista Alberti, *I libri della famiglia*, eds. Ruggiero Romano and Alberto Tenenti (Turin, It., 1969), bk. 4, p. 268 (cited in Frick, *Dressing*, p. 78).

⁷³ Frick, *Dressing*, esp. pp. 80–6; in the Pucci's family estate (the Puccis belonged to the inner circle of the Medici), clothing and jewels were worth 2,196



Figure 18. A Wedding of State. Anonymous (French School), *Ball Given on September 24, 1581, at the Court of Henry III for the Marriage of the Duc de Joyeuse and Margaret of Lorraine*. Later 16th century. Oil on copper. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Photo: Daniel Arnaudet. Photo Credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY.



Figure 19. A Bourgeois Wedding. Hieronymus Francken I, *The Wedding Dance* (c. 1600), Oil on oak wood, 49 × 66 cm. Antwerp, Museum Mayer van den Bergh. Photo Credit: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

The Dangers of Dress

No wonder then that legislators considered a clan decked out in magnificent finery for a wedding or funeral a threat: this “family” celebration was a claim to public space that in their minds should be theirs.

Control of a population thus meant control of the population’s dress. In a clear expression of this logic, after defeating revolts by cities like Ghent, the Burgundian dukes demanded the “*amende honorable*,” in which aldermen were required to appear *undressed*, in simple smocks, as they knelt in subjection before their lords.⁷⁴

SIGNS OF THE SELF

The cultural logic that fundamentally drove sumptuary legislation was thus more than a simple equation between dress and rank. It was an assumption that dress – whether adorning an individual, a clan, the aldermen of cities like Ghent, or the members of a royal court – could create identity. As though accepting the literal meaning of the term “investiture” (from the Latin for “the putting on of clothes”), the laws seem to assume that a guildsman was someone who wore a corporation’s livery, a servant was the “man” of the person whose colors and emblems made up his garments, a ruler was the person dressed most sumptuously, and the merchant a good businessman because he wore furs. In his famous customal of the late thirteenth century, Philippe Beaumanoir articulated this logic, explaining that if secular authorities arrested a man claiming

florins of a total 5,771 florins (counting immovables), p. 111. A single article of clothing in this age represented a huge expense. A fine woolen cloth from Brussels sold for the equivalent of 800 grams of gold, the price of one diamond, five rubies, and five emeralds. A scarlet woolen (the most expensive kind of luxury cloth made in the Low Countries) could easily cost 8 Flemish pounds; a dress of scarlet, lined in squirrel or ermine, would have sold for about 50 écus, each écu being the equivalent of 4.5 grams of gold. For these and other prices, see Raymond van Uytven, “Cloth in Medieval Literature of Western Europe,” in ed. idem, *Production and Consumption in the Low Countries, 13th–16th Centuries* (Aldershot, UK, 2001). Dresses ornamented with jewels, fashioned from gold or silver-threaded brocades and cut velvets or satins, and lined in expensive furs – the kind worn by aristocrats for public performances – cost even more.

⁷⁴ For this evidence, see Arnade, *Realms of Ritual*; the ritual was widespread and lasted into subsequent centuries.

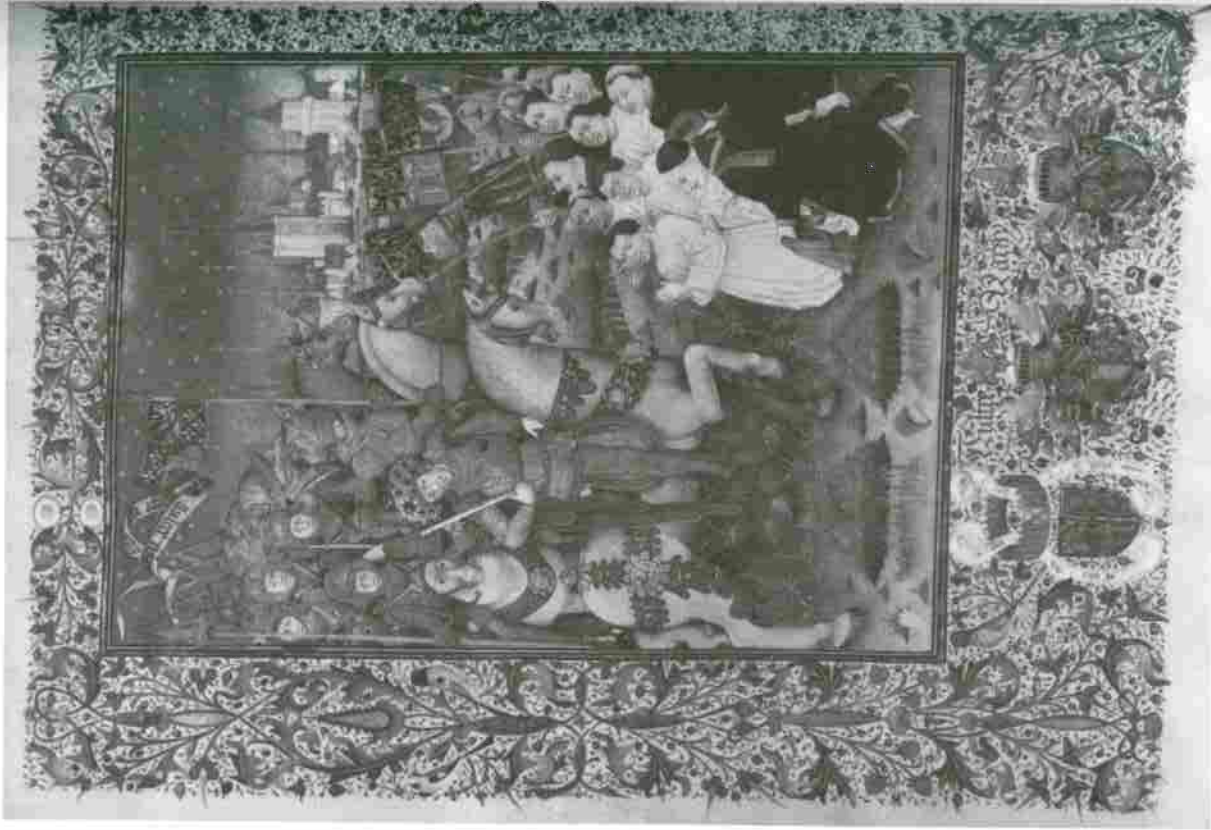


Figure 20. *Ghent Undressed*.

The Amende Honorable of the Citizens of Ghent of 1493, from *Boek van de Privilegien van Gent en van Vlaanderen*. Vienna, Austrian National Library, ms. 2583, fol. 349v. © Austrian National Library Vienna, Picture Archive.

clerical status and wearing clerical vestments, it was their obligation to disprove his claim, not the accused's obligation to prove it.⁷⁵ San Bernardino evoked this understanding as well when, in a sermon given in 1427, he scolded widows who "are not as you used to be. I see a widow today . . . with her forehead bare and her cloak drawn back to show her cheek. And how she shapes it over the brow! That is a prostitute's gesture." In Diane Owen Hughes's words, the friar did not "attribute to signs a merely reflective power. He reminded his audiences that costume and gesture could actually create identity."⁷⁶

Aaron Gurevich has argued that such examples expressed metaphysical predispositions typical of medieval society. People in this age, he said, had a "tendency to translate the spiritual into the concretely sensible and material."⁷⁷ The medical theory of humors exemplifies the code he described.⁷⁸ Magic can be considered another manifestation of the same concept; it "worked" because material substances were thought to be animated by spirit, because humans were thought to be immersed in a natural world that was indistinguishably spiritual and material, and because their bodies were available to spirit.⁷⁹

According to this logic, clothing was considerably more than a producer of social status, more even than a *sign* of identity. It was constituent

⁷⁵ Philippe de Remi Beaumanoir, *The Coutumes de Beauvaisis of Philippe de Beauvais*, trans. F. R. P. Akenurst (Philadelphia, 1992), #354, Chapter 11. A lay judge who acted without such proof against a man later shown to have in fact been a cleric was subject to excommunication.

⁷⁶ Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs," p. 54. For the quote from San Bernardino, see San Bernardino da Siena, *La Prediche volgari di San Bernardino da Siena dette nella piazza del campo l'anno 1427*, ed. Luciano Banchi, Vol. II, p. 207; cited in Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs."

⁷⁷ Aaron Gurevich, *Medieval Popular Culture: Problems of Belief and Perception*, trans. J. A. Bak and P. A. Hollingsworth (Cambridge, UK, 1988).

⁷⁸ In the theory of humors, bodily fluids like bile and phlegm were considered essences of the person, not — as we might think — agents "causing" reactions in a physical body that was distinct both from the "self" and from the causative agent.

⁷⁹ As Charles Taylor put it, "the world of magic seems to entail a thralldom, an imprisoning of the self in uncanny external forces, even a ravishing or loss of self [in the modern sense]": Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), p. 192.

of identity. As one recent scholar has claimed, "public appearance and behavior [were] thought not to falsify personal identity but, on the contrary, to establish and maintain it."⁸⁰ In their recent *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, Anne Jones and Peter Stallybrass explained that clothes were then able to "inscribe themselves upon a person who comes into being through that inscription." Dresses and cloaks, tunics and capes were, they continue, "material memories" with "the power to constitute an essence"; they were "worn so deeply" that they constituted the self.⁸¹ It was the same even for people low down on the social ladder. For example, Natalie Davis reported that a sixteenth-century Lyonnais peasant donated his tunic to the Corpus Christi confraternity in his village in order, he explained, "to be a participant in [their] prayers and services."⁸² The issuers of sumptuary legislation who so randomly, almost comically, charged dress with the capacity to disrupt gender norms, unleash sexual lust, incite greed, feed pride, bring economic ruin, and confuse rank seem to have been struggling to stabilize their understanding of the relationship between the presentation of the person and the person. One way to understand this is that they were trying to preserve a "medieval" code in which the self was thought the equivalent of its external manifestation. I think, however, that it is not quite that simple. Rather than trying to preserve such a code, they were trying to decide what the code was — just how appearance was connected to reality, or the external to the internal. Understood in those terms, sumptuary legislation was a sign of a cultural crisis, the record of an historical moment when the relationship between the material and immaterial was being reformulated as a result of pressure on dress.⁸³

⁸⁰ Susan Crane, *The Performance of Self: Ritual, Clothing, and Identity during the Hundred Years War* (Philadelphia, 2002), p. 4.

⁸¹ Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, pp. 2–3. For a rich discussion of this issue, see in particular their entire introduction.

⁸² Davis, *The Gift*: from Archives départementales du Rhône 3E1012 (1558).

⁸³ On enforcement (and its apparent futility) in England, see Hooper, "Tudor Sumptuary Laws"; Harte, "State Control," pp. 143–8; on Germany (Bavaria), see Baur, *Kleiderordnungen*, esp. pp. 81ff.; for Swiss cities, Vincent, *Costume and Conduct* and for Nuremberg, Greenfield, *Sumptuary Law in Nürnberg*. Some authors particularly focus on efforts to enforce these laws, arguing that the patterns of enforcement reveal intention. See in particular Killebrew, "Problems."

In a larger sense, worries about the relationship between the material and immaterial were hardly new, and they were not confined to questions about dress. The best evidence we have of this cultural history comes from religious thought, for during most of the Middle Ages such debates took place in ecclesiastical chambers where scholars worried whether the apprehensible world of objects, images, and signs provided access to the divine. If so – that is, if the divine was manifested as real presence – the material world could reveal and even provide access to the divine. Brigitte Bedos-Rezak has recently explained that during the twelfth century, after centuries of uncertainty, a tentative resolution was reached. It was then decided that the eucharist was “in and of itself, what it represents” – an aspect of God’s incarnation as Christ. By extension, material symbols had the “capacity to embody [the] . . . referent’s ontological characteristics”; images could not just *represent* but also *embody* substance.⁸⁴ Bedos-Rezak also reasoned that the “turn to the material, as it might be called, had implications far beyond universities, monasteries, and ecclesiastical chambers, so that “the concepts of both social and personal identity came to be formulated in relation to such signs.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak, “Medieval Identity: A Sign and a Concept,” *American Historical Review* 105:5 (December 2000), pp. 1499 and 1503. Also see Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak and Dominique Iogna-Prat, *L’individu au moyen âge: Individuation et individualisation avant la modernité* (Paris, 2005).

Jeffrey Hamburger has made a similar point in an article about the work of the fourteenth-century mystic Seuse (the Latinized form of Suso). Hamburger comments that one finds in Seuse’s work a counter to the “Platonic denigration of images. . . . The Christian emphasis on the Incarnation was the trump card.” Quoting another scholar, Hamburger continues, “no matter what the reservations of theologians, just as the cross became the crucifix, so too, images increasingly were conflated with the bodies they represented. . . . For the invisible to be knowable or verifiable it had at some level to enter the realm of the visible”: Hamburger, “Visible, yet Secret: Images as Signs of Friendship in Seuse,” *Oxford German Studies* 36, no. 2 (2007), pp. 141–62, pp. 150–1, citing Jean-Claude Schmidt, *Le corps des images: essais sur la culture visuelle au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 2002).

⁸⁵ She based her argument on a study of the wax seals that rulers had begun to attach to their written communications. They came to seem more than mere sign: they were a literal embodiment of the issuer’s personal authority. Bedos-Rezak, “Medieval Identity.”

A principle that has been labeled *imitatio* followed: the idea that individuals expressed and acquired identity by modeling their behavior and experience on externals, including, as Caroline Bynum has argued, on groups.⁸⁶

However, to materialize the self in this manner was paradoxically to abstract and disembody the self in a way that potentially separated the individual from the image, sign, or symbol of his or her person. Bedos-Rezak mused, “It is as if absence were required for the question of identity even to become conceivable.”⁸⁷ Dyan Elliott made a similar observation in an article examining men’s efforts to control female dress during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. To resist the standards men sought to impose, Elliott argued, women developed a more interiorized conception of the self, one free of or prior to the material world of fixed symbols, thereby spurring “a movement away from the twelfth-century paradigm of *imitatio*.”⁸⁸ Thus was born what medievalists have often labeled the “medieval individual,” in a sense a self-generating personality free from externals.⁸⁹

Most Renaissance scholars would contest the notion that the “individual” emerged in medieval European culture, for it has long been taught that only during the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries and

⁸⁶ Caroline Bynum has argued that people in twelfth-century Europe tended to imagine that their interior selves could be formed by literally imitating the behavior of external models. Although aware of the possibility of hypocrisy – that one could simply masquerade as the model without internalization – “in general writers assumed that, in reform and moral improvement, exterior and interior will and should go together.” It is for this reason, she continued, that we find so much emphasis on externality in medieval culture – on gestures, for example, or on radically ascetic practices: Caroline Walker Bynum, “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?” in *Jesus as Mother* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 82–109.

⁸⁷ Bedos-Rezak, “Medieval Identity,” p. 1532.

⁸⁸ Dyan Elliott, “Dress as Mediator between Inner and Outer Self: The Pious Matron of the High and Later Middle Ages,” *Mediaeval Studies* 53 (1991), pp. 279–308, p. 307.

⁸⁹ Classic works include Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1927); Colin Morris, *The Discovery of the Individual, 1050–1200* (New York, 1972); Walter Ullmann, *The Individual and Society in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1966).

even later did people learn to separate their outer self from an interior in the way imagined by modern westerners. This interpretation was given its earliest and once dominant form by Jacob Burckhardt in his 1860 book *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. As he explained, the Renaissance was the time and Italy was the place that the individual was “discovered.” Citizens in commercial cities uncovered their interior – their true – selves by consciously rejecting the external world that medieval people had thought the “real.” In those benighted medieval centuries, he claimed,

Both sides of human consciousness – that which was within and that which was turned without – lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. . . . In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the state and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual individual and recognized himself as such.⁹⁰

The historiography that followed Burckhardt for more than a century eagerly pursued this line of reasoning, giving us a story of the Renaissance hero who triumphed over the hoary institutions of medievalism and that culture’s infantile investment in things and outward appearance.⁹¹ To quote a study written when the Burckhardtian model was ascendant, this “mighty and revolutionary generative idea” created

⁹⁰ Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. C. G. Middlemore (New York, 1990; orig. Basel 1860), p. 98.

⁹¹ Johan Huizinga credited the Renaissance with the same discovery. He wrote that the period was the “great awakening,” the instant when medieval culture exited the “illusion and dream” of a “beautiful and insecure play” where splendor and pomp were prized over the intangible. In his view, the famously elegant Burgundian court on which he concentrated was the epitome of medieval culture’s overinvestment in appearances. It was marked, he said, by “an incredible superficiality and febleness. [There] the complexity of things in general is ignored by it in a truly astounding manner. It [this culture’s imagination] proceeds to generalizations unhesitatingly on the strength of a single instance. Its liability to wrong judgment is extreme. . . . All these defects are rooted in its fundamental formalism”: Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1924) [orig. 1919], pp. 234–5 and 248.

a “dichotomy of all reality into *inner experience and outer world*, subject and object, private reality and public truth.”⁹²

Although scholars no longer accept Burckhardt’s interpretation about the nature of the Renaissance or the discovery of the individual (however, his narrative is still very much alive in survey books and popular histories), most do agree that in this age it became possible to imagine a fully interiorized individual, one distinct from the material world of appearances.⁹³ What they reject is Burckhardt’s claim that this was a “discovery.”⁹⁴ Led by the New Historicists, critics now argue that the notion of an interior self was not found, but discursively created as people psychologically constructed an imagined barrier between their “real,” interiorized self – Hamlet’s “that within which passeth show” – and the person they showed to the world.⁹⁵ This was the inaugural

⁹² Suzanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (Cambridge, UK, 1942), quoted in Jonathan Dewald, *Aristocratic Experience and the Origins of Modern Culture, 1570–1715* (Berkeley, CA, 1993), p. 6.

⁹³ The current online *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* summarizes Burckhardt thus: “In Jacob Burckhardt’s *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860) . . . ‘individualism’ combines the notion of the aggressive self-assertion of individuals freed from an externally-given framework of authority (as found in Louis Blanc) and that of the individual’s withdrawal from society into a private existence (as in Tocqueville) with the idea, most clearly expressed by Humboldt, of the full and harmonious development of the individual personality, seen as representing humanity and pointing towards its highest cultural development. . . . The Italian of the Renaissance was for Burckhardt the firstborn of the sons of modern Europe in virtue of the autonomy of his morality, his cultivation of privacy, and the individuality of his character” (New York, 1992).

⁹⁴ As Charles Taylor has pointed out, the idea that individuals exist independently of the material or the external is “not a universal one. . . . Rather it is function of a historically limited mode of self-interpretation, one which has become dominant in the modern West”: Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 111.

⁹⁵ In the words of Stephen Greenblatt, the modern self is not “set off from linguistic convention, from social pressure, from the shaping force of religious and political power. Characters are not stable selves existing outside performances; rather people have ‘always already experienced’ themselves in fictional terms before inhabiting those selves.” The sixteenth century was the moment of creation, the time when there was “an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process”; Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980),

moment of exit from the "self-imposed nonage" (*selbst verschuldenen Unmündigkeit*) that Kant considered the essence of Enlightenment, the time when Europeans are understood to have fashioned a new self.⁹⁶

Whether a discovery or a process of psychological readjustment, this cultural transformation was not, however, the creation of a few advanced men of the Renaissance; it took centuries and unraveled in different intellectual, religious, and social venues, just as medievalists have long argued. However, most scholars agree that Descartes represents a kind of end point in this story. In Charles Taylor's summary, Descartes provided "the full realization of one's being as immaterial . . . [which]

pp. 120 and 237. That "artful" person was "fashioned" to protect and position the interior person who was confronted by a hostile world of competing, alien, and often brutalizing institutions of power, especially the church, the court, and Protestant interpretations of scripture. In addition, see Roy Porter, ed., *Rewriting the Self* (New York, 1997); Natalie Zemon Davis, "Boundaries and the Sense of Self in Sixteenth-Century France," in *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, eds. Thomas C. Heller et al. (Stanford, CA, 1986), pp. 53-63; John Martin, "Inventing Sincerity, Refashioning Prudence: The Discovery of the Individual in Renaissance Europe," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (December 1997), pp. 1309-42; Michael Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591-1791* (Stanford, CA, 1996); Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, eds., *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies* (New York, 1992).

Additional reading on the relationship between practice and performance on the one hand and identity on the other includes Charles S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief" and "How to Make Our Ideas Clearer" in *Peirce on Signs*, ed. J. Hooper (Chapel Hill, NC, 1991); Pierre Bourdieu, "Structures, Habitus, Practices" and "Belief and the Body," in *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, UK, 1990); Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY, 1977); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA, 2002). Also see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990), which focuses on gender and its constructions and makes a more complicated argument about identity and performance. Butler comments that "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (p. 25).

⁹⁶ Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" in ed. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: A Comprehensive Anthology* (New York, 1973), pp. 383-90, p. 384.

involves perceiving the ontological cleft between the soul and the material and this involves grasping the material world as mere extension.⁹⁷ In Weber's celebrated formulation, the post-Cartesian world was "disenchanted"; the self became the great moral project of modernity, as Kant instructed and as Foucault has most famously deconstructed, the individual as citizen was positioned outside of, indeed prior to, society, as political and social theorists like Locke and Hobbes insisted; and the individualist "rational" actor was presented as the neoclassical theorist's economic man.⁹⁸

Whether we begin this story with Bedos-Rezak's medieval theologians and rulers, Burckhardt's Renaissance Italians, or the New Historicists' sixteenth-century Englishmen, the creation of the interiorized individual was not a smoothly linear process. Nor was the cultural process in which it was embedded — the conception of the material world "as mere extension." In fact, the period between 1300 and 1600 might be better depicted as a furious contest over the power of material objects rather than an epoch when the material was pacifically abandoned as a manifestation of the real. This was, after all, the age of witchcraft persecutions, when the corporeal was thought to be invaded by spirit. It was then that rioters throughout the continent went to the streets to smash sacred images.⁹⁹ Admittedly, Protestants would later come to agree that images were not the essence of the sacred, but rather "mere appearances . . . 'dark significations' or 'blind superstitions' that obstructed the eyes of the mind from directing their gaze upon a spiritual object," as a recent scholar said.¹⁰⁰ But the iconoclastic battles of the sixteenth century would not have been fought as they were had these early Reformers

⁹⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 145.

⁹⁸ For Kant, see in particular Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" For Foucault, see "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), pp. 32-50.

⁹⁹ Charles Taylor has explained the witchcraft persecutions in exactly these terms. He wrote that they lay "between a period in which people accepted without resistance their insertion in a universe of meaningful order and a period in which that universe of meaningful order was definitely shattered [and thus] could be a response to the fragility of the emerging identity as its was establishing itself": Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 192.

¹⁰⁰ For the quotation, see Goodrich, "Signs Taken for Wonders," pp. 711-12.

actually believed that icons were inert. Natalie Davis's essay "Rites of Violence" makes the point elegantly, and more recent work by scholars such as Eamon Duffy shows the extent to which this materialist conception of the sacred pervaded early modern England, both among those who clung to the old faith and those who would reform it.¹⁰¹ The same anxieties attended the so-called vestiarian controversy in Elizabethan England. In modern hindsight it appears to be a silly quarrel about what priests should wear; however, to contemporaries it was a struggle about the materialization of the sacred, one that passionately engaged both sides because Reformers and Catholics alike were staking a claim to what Jones and Stallybrass called the "animating and constitutive power of clothes."¹⁰² For both sides dress mattered, and mattered desperately.

The fury that drove these battles on the streets or in courtrooms or churches, although evidence of how seriously contemporaries took the question about the relationship between appearance and reality, also reflects the equation's insecurity. The stories, poems, and plays from the age clearly voiced the uncertainty. For example, fairy tales like Cinderella or Puss in Boots not only simultaneously depended on but also played with the idea that dress equals personhood. The thirteenth-century's widely circulated *Romance of the Rose* worried about the equation's fragility, branding any fakery in dress as a moral transgression, equivalent to conscious deceit, thievery, or fraud.¹⁰³ Faux Semblant, a leading character in the story, brags that he is "very good at changing my clothes, at donning one outfit and discarding another. At one moment I am a knight, at another a prelate, now a canon, now a clerk, now a

¹⁰¹ Natalie Davis, "The Rites of Violence," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975); Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, C.1400-C.1580* (New Haven, CT, 1992); Duffy is particularly effective in detailing the visual aspects of worship and faith. Lyndal Roper concurs that the contrast between the two positions in the early centuries of the Reformation should not be overdrawn. This was a time of "theological instability. . . . For Catholics as for Protestants, the precise relationship between bodies, spirits and demons proved hard to define": Roper, "Exorcism and the Theology of the Body," in Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil* (London, 1994), pp. 171-99, p. 174. For more on the iconoclastic riots, see Arnade, *Beggars*.

¹⁰² Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, p. 4.

¹⁰³ On the German fairy tales and other literary representations of the "Kleider machen Leute" theme, see Baur, *Kleiderordnungen*, pp. 8-15.

priest, now disciple, now master, now lord of the manor, now forester, in short I am of every calling. Again, I am prince one moment, page the next."¹⁰⁴ Royalty were not exempt from the worries dramatized by Faux Semblant. When finding herself surrounded by elegantly dressed bourgeoisie on a visit to the Low Countries, the French queen, Jeanne of Navarre, is said to have complained, "I thought I was the only queen in Ghent and Bruges, [but] here I see hundreds of them."¹⁰⁵ Giovanni Sercambi, an Italian writer of the fifteenth century, rudely mocked the equation with a tale about a furrier in Lucca who panicked when he undressed in the city's public baths, fearing "to lose his identity in the crowd." He thus put a straw crosier (*Stroblevezz*) on his right shoulder to identify himself. It fell, and a neighbor picked it up, shouting, "I am now you. Away! You are dead." The furrier, Sercambi tells us with some amusement, actually believed himself dead.¹⁰⁶

Phillip Stubbes's sixteenth-century *Anatomie of Abuses* displayed an even deeper confusion. On the one hand, as Jones and Stallybrass emphasize, Stubbes reviled extravagant apparel as superfluous and economically damaging, precisely because, to quote them, the "superfluity" of apparel seemed to him to have "the power to constitute an essence." Quoting liberally from Stubbes's book, Jones and Stallybrass go on to argue the following:

Clothes . . . leave a "print or character" upon observer and wearer alike. And, when excessive, they visibly imprint "wickedness and sinne." Through its ability "print or character" the wearer, exotic clothing "*transnatureth*" English gallants, "making them weake, tender and infirme." Clothes give a nature to what previously had no nature; they take an existing nature and transnature it, turning the virtuous into the vicious, the strong into the weak, the male into the female, the godly into the satanic [emphasis in original].¹⁰⁷

On the other hand, the passages quoted from Stubbes betray a sense that there is, in fact, a self prior to clothing. Stubbes's fury is directed not simply at the power that dress has to *constitute* identity and not simply

¹⁰⁴ Cited by Heller, "Sumptuary Laws," p. 328.

¹⁰⁵ "Je croyais seule être reine à Gand et à Bruges, et j'en vois ici par les centaines." Baudrillart, *Histoire du Lince*, pp. 250-1.

¹⁰⁶ In Bulst, "Zum Problem," p. 37.

¹⁰⁷ Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, p. 4.

at its ability to disrupt the social order, but simultaneously at its ability to *disrupt* “nature,” to make an individual what he or she was not – to “*transnatureth*” the person [emphasis added]. The gallant’s own being, a place beyond rank and prior to his appearance, is apparently violated by the false apparel of extravagance.

One of the period’s favorite stories, the tale of Griselda, can similarly be read to question the equation between dress and selfhood even as it deploys it. The plot is simple. An Italian nobleman chooses a peasant girl as his bride and dresses her in properly aristocratic garb, thus providing the dowry she did not have. With this act he claims her and her body as his own and transforms her identity from peasant to noble. He then cruelly tests her loyalty and reaffirms his ownership by systematically abusing her, most hideously by claiming to have murdered her daughter and son and then by demanding that she leave his house, stripped of her finery, so he can marry again, this time a woman just out of girlhood. Through it all, “patient Griselda” is stoic, obedient, unprotesting. In the end, the nobleman is convinced of her loyalty, takes her back, and presents her children to her, revealing that the girl who was to be his bride was in fact Griselda’s daughter. And then, as most versions have it, he redresses Griselda in glorious celebration, reincorporating her into his household and into his station in life.

The many versions of this story that circulated throughout Europe played with these themes of clothes, bodies, men, women, identity, true nobility, the inner and outer person, all obsessing about the relationship between dress and self – some problematizing the equation, some accepting it. However, all the versions make this relationship the moral center of the play. All worry about whether one could perform oneself the trick on which the Griselda story turns – become another person just by putting on new clothes. The story’s popularity and its variant tellings bear witness to its power. It exposed, but disrupted, the equation between personhood and clothing. Griselda, whether naked, whether luxuriously or meagerly clothed, might still be Griselda.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Diane Owen Hughes has pointed to the way paintings, by playing with “distinguishing signs” (in this case earrings), could similarly force the turn inward. See her discussion of Bellini’s *St. Francis in the Desert* in “Distinguishing Signs,” p. 59.

But if there was a Griselda behind her dress, who was she? What “self” lay behind? This is the dark side of Burckhardt’s “free” individual. As a recent commentator has put it, “His *auf sich selbst gestellten Persönlichkeiti* (so liberally translated as ‘free personality’) is the individual stripped bare of all traditional defenses, standing naked before the world.”¹⁰⁹ Naked, we might note, just like Griselda.

Sumptuary legislation seems to express precisely the disquiet evidenced in stories like Griselda, in Stubbes’s vitriolic sermon, or in simple tales like Cinderella. Another scholar made this argument about the *Romance of the Rose*, claiming that it “gives insight into the emotions and fears propelling the creation of sumptuary laws . . . [and] provides an elaborated picture of the vestimentary hypocrisy irritating many levels of later thirteenth-century society.”¹¹⁰ In a commentary on Alan Hunt’s *Governance of the Consuming Passions*, Peter Goodrich similarly proposed that controversies about clerical garb were animated by the same fears that drove sumptuary legislation. “The law of images is pivotal to an understanding of sumptuary regulation,” he explained. The “licit image of a person [targeted by sumptuary legislation] was linked indissolubly to the order of images and the role of symbols, of what Reformers called the ‘visible word,’ in public and private life.” The attack on dress was an attack on idolatry, to be condemned as “the painted and plastic accoutrements of false or misdirected worship.”¹¹¹ The laws seemed to say that there was a “real” person underneath the clothes, and governors were desperately trying to figure out how to link the two – or wondering if such a link could be made.

Based on such evidence, I would argue that stories and events like those mentioned earlier do not express the last gasp of a “medieval”

¹⁰⁹ Zachary Sayre Schuffman, “Dimensions of Individuality: Recent French Works on the Renaissance,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 49 (1996), pp. 114–23.

¹¹⁰ Heller, “Sumptuary Laws,” p. 331.

¹¹¹ Further, “the regulation of apparel and appearance was always and crucially a matter of theological significance, a question of moral governance of the means or media through which an invisible and divine order was to be seen and honored in its manifest form”: Goodrich, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” pp. 711–12. Goodrich goes on to argue that women were targeted by sumptuary legislation because “the idol was in essence an erotic image, a confusion of the soul with sensuality” (p. 714).

culture in which people had had no viable sense of an independent self. Rather, they reveal that in this age it had become urgent to decide just how the material and immaterial were related. To be sure, as Natalie Davis has put it in describing the sixteenth-century French, for them “the boundary around the conceptual self and the bodily self was not always firm and closed.”¹¹² That surely does not mean that they could not conceive of distinct individuality; rather, it means that they imagined the relationship between the conceptual self and the bodily self differently than we might – or differently than Burckhardt thought they should have. As Lyndal Roper has protested, to deny them that self-consciousness does little but provide us “with a written guarantee of the modernity of our own time”; it reduces early modern Europeans adorned in expensive furs, sumptuous velvets, and outrageously decorated sleeves to “dancing marionettes, tricked out in ruffs and codpieces, whose subjectivities can neither surprise nor unsettle [us],” because they seem expressions of an exotic primitiveness that has nothing to do with us.¹¹³ Throughout those long centuries, dress and display were surely connected to subjectivity in ways that seem strange to us, but these attachments were not the expressions of “an incredible superficiality and feebleness,” as Huizinga charged in his *Waning of the Middle Ages*; nor were these people trapped, as Burckhardt said, “beneath a common veil, dreaming or half awake.”

I would argue instead that sumptuary legislation was the sign of a cultural crisis, a crisis born of commerce and given expression in dress. The crisis was born in the early days of the commercial revolution when the luxuries provided by commerce had seemed to clarify and heighten clothing’s ability to mark status, express character, inspire awe, and even define both sexuality and gender. Shimmering silks from the East, elaborately brocaded satins and taffetas produced in high-priced workshops, European wools so luxuriously fulled that they draped like velvet – all could make those so adorned seem utterly unlike the mass of ordinary onlookers. But the very abundance and variety that made such display possible simultaneously eroded its power. When Europeans began to experiment with style, cutting and shaping their clothes in

¹¹² Davis, “Boundaries and the Sense of Self in Sixteenth-Century France,” p. 53.

¹¹³ Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil*, p. 11.

extraordinary ways, dress seemed to lose all solidity – just what did a puffed sleeve, a gold trim, a fur lining, or a brocaded doublet actually mean? Dress became so excessive and overcharged that it became a fetish. When people of low birth acquired the means to buy these clothes, when artisans in Europe learned to make cheaper copies of imported silks or luxury draperies, and when tailors and dressmakers invented yet another new sleeve or cap or jacket, the game was up.

However, this did not mean that elites and aspiring elites would “give up” on clothes; instead, it meant that they would wonder and worry about them. Thus, storytellers played with, queried, or sometimes insisted on the link between clothes and the self – not just a self defined by rank, although that was part of their plots, but also a gendered, sexed, and moral self.¹¹⁴ As though in response to the trouble signaled by such tales, legislators scrambled to write a code into law, creating volumes of statutes, none of them able to provide a convincing argument about the link between clothes and status, morality, gender, sex, economic well-being, or political order. But all desperately trying.

TOWARD THE MODERN CONSUMER

In the end the lawmakers lost the battle. Their inability to enforce their laws as they wished and their evident confusion even about the links to be forged did little more than expose the impossibility of their task.¹¹⁵ Their failure left the self unclothed, adrift in a sea of choices and of taste, naked like Griselda. It then became urgent to create an

¹¹⁴ For such practices, see Welch, “New, Old, and Secondhand Clothing,” and Frick, *Dressing*.

¹¹⁵ Most scholars have argued that the laws were impossible to enforce and that the issuers gained little from their promulgation. However, Neithard Bulst has provided good evidence showing that legislators did collect the fines and even that many issuers depended on these fines for a significant portion of their budget. He reasoned that fiscal interests thus combined with political needs. In particular, see his “Vom Luxusverbot zur Luxussteuer. Wirtschafts – und sozialgeschichtliche Aspekte von Luxus und Konsum in der Vormoderne,” in *Der lange Weg in den Überfluss: Anfänge und Entwicklung der Konsumgesellschaft seit der Vormoderne*, ed. Michael Prinz (Aschendorff: Münster, 2003), pp. 47–60.

imagery in which, as Jones and Stallybrass have put it, "subjects are prior to objects, wearers to what is worn."¹¹⁶ That process would take many forms and a lot of time, not ending until well into the early modern period and perhaps never really ending, although signs of change can be seen in the centuries before 1600. For example, some versions of the Griselda story gave her a secret interior self that was unavailable to her brutal husband – a place where she despaired, wept, raged, and protested; a place where, we might argue, the modern "self" took root, a self divorced from appearance, indeed from the material world itself.¹¹⁷ It was then that essayists, poets, theologians, dramatists, and novelists took up the challenge of defining that self by crafting tools that allowed us to imagine, sketch, and perform Hamlet's "that within which passeth show." Their texts, like the versions of the Griselda story that gave her an interior self, are thus rightly recognized as important signposts in the history of European culture – markers of the moments when people "fashioned" themselves as modern. At the same time, in some court circles, the obsession with "power dressing" that had reached absurd heights in the court of Elizabeth I of England began to disintegrate. After her reign, a recent scholar has explained, English courtiers began to have themselves painted in costumes that self-consciously differed from the baroque constructions typical of her court; instead, they sought a more "natural" dress that was supposed to display their "true" selves.¹¹⁸

Clothes would by no means lose cultural significance in the centuries to come. Awash in the possibilities of fashion, faced with the infinity of choices produced by commerce, westerners would become voracious, endlessly desiring consumers of dress. However, they would do so self-consciously, strategically choosing how they would present themselves to the public, not imagining that they were creating or exposing the "real" self that made the choice. Instead, they would nervously, sometimes

¹¹⁶ Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing*, p. 2.

¹¹⁷ Petrarch's and Boccaccio's versions both allow Griselda a small space of independent, separate identity. Chaucer's Clerk's Tale, in contrast, makes Griselda equivalent to her performance of herself. On this difference, see Crane, *The Performance of Self*, pp. 29–38.

¹¹⁸ For this argument, see Breward, *Culture of Fashion*, pp. 41–74.

playfully, fiddle and experiment. This was and is a game, but it is a serious one. Clothes serve us in the creation of a self-image, a mirror into which we gaze as we fashion selfhood. In the world of sumptuary legislation, a time when stories about Cinderella, Griselda, and Faux Semblant were told and retold to adults and children alike, clothing was not supposed to be a costume that one put on and took off at will. When Faux Semblant boasted that he did just that, listeners understood that something was wrong – socially, morally, and psychologically. When these people dressed, they were not yet "fashioning" themselves as he said he was doing or as someone today might say he or she was doing; they were wondering what it meant to be "fashioned."

Commerce made clothing fungible. As a commodity, an article of clothing was potentially exchangeable for some other thing, almost anything, for price alone. As a material object always available to the market, it could also easily escape its original owner. The costume that had made the alderman's wife recognizable could be cut up to fashion the bodice for her daughter's dress; exotic materials such as finely cut velours or newly colored silks could easily be had from local merchants to transform her own gown. In secondhand markets where many such garments made their way, the sleeves of the woman's gown might be reattached to the dress of the butcher's wife and its overskirt refashioned for the butcher's daughter. No longer did the act of remaking a dress seem so innocent, so normal. Now and still worse, tailors could cut the fabric into new shapes, making even the same tissues utterly unrecognizable. Commodified in this way, clothing could no longer easily be imagined to constitute identity. It was this ambiguity that made the relationship between appearance and reality a question and contributed to the cultural crisis that marked the period: what was the relationship, after all, between the material and the immaterial?

Significantly, sumptuary legislation would not survive liberal theory of the eighteenth century. According to that paradigm, the government had no automatic right to control individual choices, especially choices of material goods. Instead, an informed and "free" citizenry whose members were able to decide for themselves about such acquisitions was considered the source of the state's own power. It was no

accident that Adam Smith called sumptuary legislation “the highest impertinence and presumption . . . in kings and ministers.”¹¹⁹ To us, sumptuary legislation can indeed seem “impertinent and presumptive,” nothing more than the futile efforts of muddleheaded legislators who were not yet in control of the states they sought to govern and still unclear about what good governance might be. But in fact that legislation was less the residue of a primitive past than one of the ways that Europeans became “modern.” Although lawmakers’ attacks may have failed to control dress, their laws allowed – indeed, implicitly drove – a new discourse about clothing and about the person inside the clothing. However archaic it may seem, however bizarre an artifact of a lost age, sumptuary legislation both created new meanings for clothing and helped give birth to the discourse of the modern self.

¹¹⁹Harte, “State Control,” p. 134. In a wide-ranging survey and analysis of the western European sumptuary legislation of the age and the discourses in which it was embedded, Alan Hunt has extended this argument. In his reasoning, sumptuary legislation was not so much “policing” in the Germanic sense, but instead “an early form of the project that comes to target as the proper task of government the manifestations of citizenship understood in terms of the social and moral well being of an aggregated population.” As such, it was a “significant step . . . in the passage to modernity.” In his view, modern states have not dropped the burden of moral and social caretaking; they have simply shifted their target, from the external to the internal being – from dress to diet, from public order to public health: Hunt, *Governance*, pp. 7 and 9.

5 Rescuing Commerce

THE COMMERCIAL REVOLUTION GAVE NEW IMPETUS TO A centuries-old discourse about the evils of surplus wealth. Merchants, tradespeople of all kinds, and women were targets of the vitriolic attacks, figured both as embodiments of the harm unleashed by commerce and as the agents of those evils. It was said that merchants greedily accumulated and hoarded riches, depriving the needy of basic subsistence and literally stealing from hapless consumers. Artisans produced shoddy goods, made up stories about their wares, and schemed to earn more for less work. Women, who were imagined to be particularly susceptible to material desires, readily abandoned spiritual pursuits for corporeal pleasures and used their sexuality to obtain the luxuries they craved.

Yet even the most passionate critics of commerce knew that commerce was necessary and that tradespeople performed essential services. Europeans of the day thus did not seek to ban commerce or banish its practitioners; rather, they sought to make trade honest, to render its practitioners honorable, and to ensure that consumers bought wisely. This chapter describes two avenues of such reform, one focusing on how to cleanse trade and the other on how to manage consumption. Although apparently unrelated developments, they combined to produce unmistakable changes in cultural discourses and social practices during the late medieval centuries. This period would by no means unreservedly celebrate commerce, but by its end it was easier to grant merchants a role in Europe’s moral economy, to argue that an individual’s energetic pursuit of profits could serve the social whole, and to concede that consumption could be virtuous.