

Maria Hayward. *Rich Apparel: Clothing and the Law in Henry VIII's England*.

Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010. xxiv + 422 pp. index. illus. tpls. gloss. bibl. \$124.95. ISBN: 978-0-7546-4096-7.

This study interrogates the gap between proscription and practice in its survey of the relationship between sumptuary law and the apparel actually worn by men and women across the social spectrum in a period broadly defined as Henrician England. Based primarily on the statistical analysis of testamentary and inventory material the author insightfully interrogates this material to explore whether clothing functioned as “a potent social marker” (xv), to discover how and why particular social groups used clothing to create identity, and to consider the construction of individualism and prevailing attitudes to the acts of apparel as laws to perhaps unnecessarily follow or flout. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, the work clothes the bare statistical evidence with details from letters and accounts, portraiture and funeral art, and extant archaeological fragments to provide a rich and nuanced study.

The volume is divided into four sections. Part 1, “Sumptuary Legislation and the Tudor Social Structure,” sets the scene considering the stipulations of the four Henrician acts of apparel (provided in tabulated form), possible mechanisms for their enforcement, and the wider legislative context for conspicuous consumption. Part 2, “Cloth and Clothing,” considers the production and consumption of textiles surveying both English and imported fabrics as well as the full range of garments and accessories available, including the social significance of specific items such as armor, horse harness, and livery. The second half of the work examines the social hierarchy as affected or exempted from the acts of apparel and includes the study of the landed hierarchy from king to laborer, women, the clergy, the secular professions, the urban elite, minstrels, and players.

In a society where perhaps fifty percent of the population was either exempt from sumptuary legislation or was from groups like the middling professionals who could legitimately apply some flexibility in their self-definition, enforcement was bound to be problematic. Yet Hayward concludes from the testamentary evidence that women, the clergy, and merchants — groups who were exempt from the law — were not extravagant in their choice of cloth or color and that peer pressure where it existed was more likely to instill conformity to one's social group rather than the emulation of social superiors. Although particular groups including the secular clergy, esquires, and men working in urban environments did deliberately use clothing as “an effective and highly visual means of defining their social position”

(348), prohibited textiles and colors were largely avoided although those higher up the social scale “pushed at the boundaries” (210) of the law for example in their choice of violet (as opposed to prohibited regal purple) cloth.

The wealth of detail in this work is intelligibly contained within a systematic format of clearly structured and subheaded chapters and tabulated information. The glossary, numbered plates, and appended documents also further facilitate engagement with the subject. While the no-doubt-strategic choice of monochrome for the plates certainly sharpened the reader’s sense of texture (see for example illustration 5.2, the 1545 portrait of Catherine Parr) the choice was perhaps disappointing for a period in which cloth color was a social issue and its terminology (crane, murrey, sad russet, tawny) so fascinating to a modern reader. But this petty complaint is, I think, really a response to what Hayward achieves in making the reader a virtual consumer: never mind the “expensive but understated” choice of black (345), I want the cloth of gold and the sables.

There can be no doubt as to the significance of this work. It is a valuable contribution to the field of material culture covering a surprisingly neglected, but demonstrably distinctive, period. It stands as a rich reference tool for an academic audience while also palpably demonstrating the valuable insights that the study of clothing culture can provide into not only the fashioning of identity (with its wider social implications and cultural manifestations) but also into broader issues of consensus and social organization in Henrician England. In addition, the accessible format and compelling descriptions such as the decorative details on christening shirts, the smuggling of letters from the Tower “sowen betwene the solles of a veluet showe” (185), or the case studies of the carefully cultivated public images of men like Sir Thomas Gresham invite the attention of a wider audience.

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