



“I base most of my fashion taste on what doesn’t itch,” the late comedian Gilda Radner famously said. Happily for her, she didn’t live in Elizabethan England, where stiff brocades and scratchy collars were the order of the day. Nor would today’s libertarians have been comfortable in Shakespeare’s time, when the government tried to control what clothing people wore by enacting a series of sumptuary laws based on social class. For the Renaissance fashionista, keeping up with the Tudors presented challenges at every turn.

“When your posterity shall see our pictures they shall think we were foolishly proud of apparel,” commented one prescient fellow in 1605. Indeed, looking at portraits of posturing men in pumpkin pants and women with necks lost beneath layers of ruffs, their modern counterparts may have reason to wonder: “What were they thinking?”

Renaissance fashion was unquestionably distinctive, especially among the upper classes, who favored luxurious fabrics, dramatic silhouettes, and as scholar Susan Vincent notes, “a decorative exuberance that loaded every point with embroidery, jewels, slashes, ribboning, and pattern.” English portraits of the period reveal a dazzling variety in the basic components of Renaissance dress: doublets, hose, and cloaks for men, and bodices, skirts, and gowns for women. But as Vincent notes, clothing was not only an expression of early modern culture, but it also reinforced the social structure. “As well as being commodities of utility and economic value,” she writes, “garments enjoyed a rich discursive life, participating in moral, religious and political debates.”

The moral and religious debate was advanced by the sixteenth-century Puritan writer Philip Stubbes, who railed against “this sinne of excesse in Apparell.” “Doth not the apparel styrre uppe the heart to pride?” he demanded. “Doth it not entice others to sinne?” Pride of appearance was also equated with a misplaced pride in man’s moral

imperfections, since clothing was thought to have arisen as a way of hiding nakedness after the Fall. “Pride in apparel is pride of our shame, for it was made to cover it,” thundered one public sermonizer.

Ben Jonson even weighed in on prideful excess, ridiculing a character in his play *Epicoene* who strained her husband’s pocketbook with her desire to dress above his means:

...she must have that rich gown for such a great day; a new one for the next; a richer for the third; be served in silver; have the chamber fill’d with...embroiderers, jewelers, tire-women, sempsters, feathermen, perfumers; whilst she feels not how the land drops away; nor the acres melt; nor foresees the change, when the mercer has your woods for her velvets; never weighs what her pride costs, sir: (Act 2, scene 1)

Clothing also served to distinguish its wearers and proclaim their positions in society. At a time when movement between social classes was becoming more fluid, clothing was one way to tell a duke from a mere gentleman from a tradesman. Unfortunately for some, the same fluidity that allowed movement among the classes also allowed people to dress with an eye toward upward mobility, which was a source of great distress to people like Stubbes: “...now there is such a confuse mingle mangle of apparell in Ailgna [England]...that it is verie hard to knowe who is noble, who is worshipfull, who is a gentleman, who is not.”

Solace for the befuddled Stubbes and his brethren came in the form of the sumptuary laws. Intended both to quell confusion over rank and to boost the local economy by limiting foreign imports, the first English acts of apparel appeared in 1337, but it was during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that they reached their legislative peak. Early laws restricted the wearing of fur and foreign cloth to the upper classes and subsequent legislation provided a raft of details. People were categorized by title, income, and profession, and assigned their fabrics accordingly. Those earning at least £100 per year were permitted to wear velvet, for example, but not satin, damask, silk, or taffeta. The wives of barons, knights, councilors, and ladies of the Queen’s Privy Chamber could use velvet and satin for their petticoats, while those belonging to the yeomen class were restricted to bonnets or shirtband ‘made out of the realm of England and Wales.’

This blog post, adapted from an article published in the Fall 2011 issue of *Folger Magazine*, is the first in a two-part series on clothing and fashion in Shakespeare’s England. Read Part 2 to learn more about the rise and fall of England’s sumptuary laws, the elaborate rules for dressing in Shakespeare’s time.