



Man's waistcoat, silk,
c.1770–79, England. Photo courtesy
Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

CONSPICUOUS WAIST: QUEER DRESS IN THE "LONG EIGHTEENTH CENTURY"¹

IN THE PRESENT CONFUSION BETWEEN THE SEXES IT IS ALMOST A MIRACLE TO BELONG TO ONE'S OWN SEX.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile²

MEN SAY THEY DON'T PARTICULARLY CARE HOW THEY DRESS, AND THAT IT IS LITTLE MATTER. I AM BOUND TO REPLY THAT I DON'T BELIEVE THEM AND DON'T THINK THAT YOU DO EITHER.

Oscar Wilde, on tour in Canada, 1882³

CONTOURS OF QUEER

What are the main contours of the history of queer men's fashion? What are its narratives? How has the concept of queer men's fashion been put together within the history of dress and the history of sexuality? How do the body and gesture work together to create a fashionable image? Why are young gay men

attacked if they appear thin and pretty? What are the precursors for this way of being in the world? Why does society blame gay male designers for attracting female shoppers? How do persecuted minorities manage their identity via clothing and fashionable looks? These are big questions indeed. They can be tested in part through an historical overview and a series of case studies reaching back in time, and in so doing, we see both how stereotypes travel across time and how they are formed at specific historical moments.

This chapter will consider the tantalizing but difficult hypothesis that “gay style actually sets trends. It’s what straight people take fashion from.” Richard Martin proposed this in his short article “The Gay Factor in Fashion” in *Esquire Gentlemen* in 1993, when he argued that gay male influence in the refining and defining of masculine style “by dint of their attraction to their own gender” had never been more pronounced than in the street-style of that period: “Straight suburban males in recent years have absorbed gay style signatures, including earrings and bandannas, and are now often indistinguishable from the gay clones of the 1970s . . . Christopher Street is our sartorial Ellis Island.”⁴

But “gay fashion” before that point was often far from butch. This overview begins with the development of sodomitical subcultures in early-modern western Europe, that is, the period 1500–1800. Much can be recovered of the fashionable taste of outsider males including their apparent liking of vibrant colors, clashing colors and patterns, and sometimes also cross-dressing, which seems to have fulfilled the roles of entertainment, ironic pleasure, or occasional sex work. Against this “backdrop,” I unpack the “archaeology” of queer dressing and explore the “queer trace” in eighteenth-century western Europe. I examine the lure of the masquerade ball as an exciting queer space and recover in terms of fashion, for the first time, a documented possible “macaroni” scandal. We shall learn what was worn in the molly houses of London in this period and how the devotees addressed each other there. We shall explore the homosexual underworld of eighteenth-century Paris and Utrecht through police records that recorded clothing. Did certain colors have a ludic and deviant charge to them? How were the “pederasts” of Paris to be recognized by their shoelaces? The significance of contemporary writing and images to subsequent understandings of the queer man cannot be underestimated. As the literary theorist George Haggerty remarks,

“already in these documents a kind of codification is going on: monstrous and inextricably internal, the sodomite haunts the century with his lethal familiarity.”⁵

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It is necessary to step back in time in order to understand the attitudes surrounding fashion today in the modern west. In the early-modern period there was as much interested in the difference between men and boys as men and women. A type of triangulated gender system emerged that was always in flux. It had a major impact on fashion since in many Italian Renaissance cities men under thirty could not wear civic clothes until they came of age. Thus they had to wear clothes in which there was temptation to engage with fashion, and there was also more innuendo about same-sex attraction and effeminacy. The thirteenth-century theologian Albertus Magnus argued that sodomy was “more common in persons of high station than in humble persons.”⁶ Moralists complained particularly of young men wearing body-hugging fashions. Most saw this as a source of weakness or decline; one, however, the author of the chronicle of Limbourg, a cleric in Mainz in 1377, interpreted it as a sign of joy after the spectre of the Black Death.⁷

Elizabeth Currie has made a detailed study of sixteenth-century Italian conduct literature. She notes that a distinction was made between old and new in all forms of behavior, with outmoded things being considered *all’antica*. Portraits of both men and women, with their trance-like faces, signal *sprezzatura*, the art of concealing art. Women, Currie argues, did not have the means to represent the country or city through their clothing, and this made women’s dress more open to accusations of deception and narcissism. Men’s civic dress was prescribed and also public; women did not have a public dress; so men’s dress was understood to represent wider social practices. Young males, unable to enter political life until the age of thirty, were also more likely to engage with changeable fashions, and like women, were accused of immodesty, effeminacy, and sometimes homosexuality.⁸ Bernadino of Siena published a sermon in which he claimed that if parents sent their boys out of the house wearing fashionable clothes with low doublets, showing parts of