

**David Kuchta.** *The Three-Piece Suit and Modern Masculinity: England, 1550-1850.* Studies in the History of Society and Culture. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002. x + 303 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-21493-4.

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## The Suit that Made the Modern Man

In this fascinating book, David Kuchta skillfully attempts to demonstrate how men's clothing played a role in political, social, economic, and religious controversies of the early modern period. To the manifold crises of the seventeenth century, Kuchta adds another--a "fashion crisis"--which would lead to the development of a new style of dress that would become both symbolic of, and integral to, modern notions of elite masculinity: the three-piece suit.

The formal inauguration of this new mode of dress can be dated to October 7, 1666 when King Charles II announced his "resolution of setting a fashion for clothes" (p. 1) that would mark the end of the long era of doublets and hose and the development of a more frugal and modest style of masculine dress based around the vest. This book places this pivotal moment in its long-term historical context, in a survey of men's clothing that spans from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. In the process, it charts a shift from a world where lavish style and conspicuous consumption in apparel were used to proclaim men's status to one of "noble simplicity," where men proclaimed their authority through a more modest style of dress that placed them above the vagaries of the mode, resulting in the feminization of fashion. Beginning with a discussion of the "old sartorial regime," which reigned between

1550 and 1688, Kuchta shows how the royal court promoted lavish consumption in dress among the elite as a means of maintaining England's social and political order. While clothes alone could not create gentility, ostentatious style was a legitimate means of preserving the outward display of men's dignity and right to respect according to their rank, birth, or office.

Yet during the seventeenth century, these ideals came under a three-pronged assault. In the first place, the "country" opposition that began in Jacobean parliaments, which would eventually develop into Whig ideology, attacked court splendor attacked as effeminate and used it to undermine the court's patriarchalist claims to power, arguing that excessive fashion had feminized England's courtly elite, making them unfit to rule. Secondly, Puritans regarded foppery as synonymous with popery, both valuing ceremony over substance, and tried to develop a new ideal of gentlemanly conduct that saw modesty in style as compatible with virtuous gentility. Finally, the development of mercantilism in the later seventeenth century promoted industry and frugality as both economic and moral imperatives, and encouraged gentlemen consumers to abandon fashions made from imported foreign silks in favor of more "manly" and "patriotic" apparel made from English wool. These new ideals of frugality in men's fashion were appropriated by Charles II after the

Restoration, who, reacting to a wave of anti-French sentiment after the Great Fire and anxious to assert his own cultural leadership, sought to pre-empt the imposition of a new style of dress by Parliament and the country by introducing a modest, anti-French fashion in the form of the three-piece suit. While the initial success of the three-piece suit was short-lived, as the increasingly self-confident court returned to the mode of France in the 1670s, the Glorious Revolution marked the ascendancy of the modest, three-piece suit as the emblem of ideal masculinity. In the half-century that followed the Glorious Revolution, propagandists and writers from across the political spectrum argued that refraining from luxury was a key to political stability and used a language of manly simplicity in their pursuit of the political and moral high ground. As the sartorial excesses of fops and macaronis were attacked in print and visual satire, "fashion" as a social category was feminized. While it was legitimate for elite women to follow the mode, men of fashion were seen as impolite and trivial, lacking true masculine authority. The book ends by showing how the three-piece suit was appropriated by middle-class critics of aristocratic corruption in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as enshrining the values of the "self-made man," symbolic of the manliness, modesty and industry that carried political legitimacy.

This is an impressive study that draws upon a vast array of conduct literature and political, economic, and religious tracts. It is written in a snappy and engaging style that does not fail to hold the reader's interest. The book makes a significant contribution to a rapidly developing area of early modern historiography concerned with masculinity and manners. While masculinity, foppery, and politeness have been the subjects of many recent studies, most notably the work of Michele Cohen and Philip Carter (the latter curiously neglected in Kuchta's bibliography), this book refocuses the debate on early modern fashion and masculinity by showing how opposition to luxury and effeminacy

promoted, rather than inhibited men's style of display.[1] More than any previous study, this book highlights the importance of clothing as a means of "shap[ing] the way in which power was thought, enacted and reformulated" in early modern England (p. 7). In doing so, it brings a new dimension to the disputes of the seventeenth century, and demonstrates how political, religious, and economic controversy was inherently gendered. The long-term chronology of this work is another advantage. By exploring attitudes towards fashion over three centuries, Kuchta is able to show how change in men's consumer habits occurring at the end of the eighteenth century towards a plain, modest style of dress, known to costume historians as the "great masculine renunciation," was not based on new ideas, but was the continuation of a process that began in the late seventeenth century with the inauguration of the first three-piece suit.

In essence, this is more a history of ideas than a history of costume. Some of the material and issues addressed will be familiar already to students of the early modern luxury debates. While costume historians will find invaluable information here for placing changing styles into their ideological context, readers interested in the development of men's apparel might find the discussion of the three-piece suit itself rather limited. A fuller exploration of the sartorial development of the three-piece suit from its beginnings in the Restoration to the mid-Victorian period might have helped to understand further the framework of historical change Kuchta sets out to explain. The book is well illustrated with black and white pictures, but these images are under-utilized in the analysis. For instance, the ways in which dress was used in portraits to project masculine power are not given much attention, but would repay further study. Though the book sets out to examine changes in men's consumer habits, there is relatively little on the actual experiences of men as consumers, as evinced by diaries, letters, wills, household accounts, or retail records. Personal

testimony might have been more fully used to explore the effects of sartorial change on the self-image of early modern men. Finally, while a great strength of this book is its analysis of the ways in which clothing functioned as a site of political conflict, there are other tensions evident in the literature of the seventeenth-century fashion crisis that are not addressed. For instance, seventeenth-century debates about masculinity and effeminacy intersected with other points of conflict, such as that between youth and maturity. How the politics of age informed the politics of dress and gender remains a question for future study. That this book raises important questions and opens up so many possibilities for further study, is a testament to its lively approach to this fascinating and intriguing subject. David Kuchta has placed the three-piece suit firmly on the historical agenda, and has provided stimulating reading not just for scholars of costume and gender, but also for economic and political historians.

#### Note

[1]. For instance, Michele Cohen, *Fashioning Masculinity: National Identity and Language in the Eighteenth Century* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996); Philip Carter, "Men About Town: Representations of Masculinity and Foppery in Early Eighteenth-Century Urban Society," in *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities*, ed. Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus (New York and London: Longman/St Martin's Press, 1997), pp. 31-57. Admittedly, Carter's book was probably published too late to impact on this survey: *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society: Britain 1660-1800* (New York and London: Longman/St Martin's Press, 1997).

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