The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America

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In the introduction to *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* author Kate Haulman puts forward the question ‘How was fashion political in eighteenth-century British North America?’ In addressing this, she uses fashion as a platform to explore the dynamics of gender relations, societal hierarchies and issues of trans-Atlantic commerce within the politics of 18th-century America, from colonies to republic. Haulman approaches ‘fashion’ comprehensively to look beyond the latest styles in dress and textiles, to consider as well the latest modes in hair dressing, manners, and the modes of presentation that identified societal status and connections. By employing these broad brush strokes, fashion provides an effective link between diverse (but as Haulman demonstrates, related) discussions on commercialism, gender issues, and status at this volatile time.

The book is organized more or less chronologically and follows the dominant fashion trends beginning with the century’s early colonial society, through the growing political unrest, revolution, and into the early years of the American republic, concluding with the presidential election of 1800. The geographic focus is on the major port cities of Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Charleston. This allows an overview of the entire Atlantic seaboard, and in addition, these port cities were the principale points of exchange for fashion ideas and commercial goods with the mother country and other overseas ports.

Using clothing and appearance as a key to identifying and understanding societies’ many profiles can be problematic. There is always the question of personal taste and preferences in clothing choices, plus fashionable dress has long been seen as fickle, always changeable, and therefore questionable in guaranteeing established symbols of status. Haulman addresses this natural tension inherent in clothing and textile choices in the first chapter with examples of the adoption of fashion in various levels of society and situations. Fashion is most often associated with the elite classes, who leveraged their social status with the elegance of their appearance. They are given the most attention in the book, but Haulman also investigates situations in which fashion was co-opted by non-elite groups. Newspaper advertisements for the return of servants breaking indentures and slaves fleeing to freedom often identified the runaways with details of dress. They may have escaped with only their own clothes, but especially for the enslaved, masking identity required different clothing to the coarse textiles used for plantation clothing and this encouraged theft of elites’ garments. Haulman gives accounts of runaway slaves who inventively combined bits and pieces of

clothing that could include an English styled garment combined with a Caribbean headscarf along with plantation items to produce a look that was Afro-American-Caribbean and English. In these instances she states, 'the politics and poetics of fashion collided' (p. 29). Additionally, there was a market for second-hand clothing in the colonies where garments could become currency.

For runaways fashion could aid in creating a new and individual identity, but it could also reflect the needs of larger groups within the larger society. Haulman looks to the Quakers of Philadelphia as an example. They stressed plainness in dress, prompted by their religious beliefs, yet tension developed as they gained in wealth and position due primarily to trans-Atlantic commerce. Some followed the inclination of other societal groups to express their advancement through finer appearance in clothing and accessories. Many managed a compromise by eliminating excessive ornamentation and placing the emphasis upon fine textiles and the exacting cut and fit of the garment. Haulman explores the diary of young elite Quaker elite Hannah Callender to look at this dilemma within the context of not only Quakerism but also the expectations surrounding the appropriate presentation of a young genteel American woman. Hannah demonstrated through her diary entries an awareness of behavioral modes that exemplified feminine gentility and merit. She supported the idea that the art of fashionable display should be subordinated to the domestic arts and internal goodness. The print world and such novels as *Pamela: or Virtue Rewarded* and *Clarissa: or The History of a Young Lady*, both by Samuel Richardson, reinforced appropriate conduct that included abiding by the dictates of family and society. A loss of virtue and thus society's approval could also mean the loss of prospects for a good marriage, and within the established gender hierarchy, a good marriage was the expected goal for a genteel lady. In this context, fashionable dress was a double-edged sword. The advantage it gave to appearance could draw positive attention and result in the desired good marriage, but ostentation could make the gentleman prospect wary of how much this wife might cost him.

Haulman stresses throughout that 18th-century fashion was metaphorically feminine; it was the woman's empire. Luxury goods were generally branded as effeminate, though there was a male equivalent: the 'fop', a man with too much lace, trim, and an exaggerated hairstyle accompanied by notable vanity. Neither the coquette nor the fop won approval in British North America. Both were conceptually tied to exaggeration and luxury and therefore suspect. Debates surrounding luxury were ongoing from the colonial era into the early American republic and were attached to the fear that the desire for imported luxury goods and the personal debt that usually accompanied this could present a danger to the economic foundation of North America.

In the years building up to the break with Britain, the importation of goods as opposed to domestic manufacture became an escalating subject of debate, with fashion items, particularly textiles, a major topic. Haulman discusses this mid-century period with a focus upon the world of trans-Atlantic commercialism, its impact upon the colonial economy and its subsequent influence upon gender issues. She supports her discussion with source material contemporary to the time and references a 1753 pamphlet published in Boston and titled, *Industry and Frugality Proposed as the Surest Means to Make Us a Rich and Flourishing People*. The pamphlet expressed concern over the amount of linen cloth imported and proposed the manufacture of linen as a means to promote industry and frugality. Gender politics entered the proposal as women were to be the labor source for this industry, with the vision that their spinning would bolster home manufacture and discourage the dependence on foreign goods. The pamphlet pointed out that though the colonies were poorer than 30 years before, 'we are at the same Time finer' due to the imported goods. This was a period when the terms 'patriotism' and 'love of country' began to appear in political rhetoric and even appeared in the context of imported textiles.

In the following decade, the 1760s, tensions escalated with the Revenue Acts and according to Haulman these focused upon 'the consumption of "feminized" luxury goods, especially fabrics' (p. 107). The Sugar Act of April 1764, though chiefly a tax on molasses, also included textiles imported into the colonies from France and from the East. This gave another impetus to the industry begun a decade before and a linen manufactory was established in Philadelphia much like that begun in Boston, employing poor women to produce domestic cloth. With the Stamp Act in July 1765, criticism was levelled at men as well for

unpatriotic consumption, but with its repeal the following year the *Pennsylvania Gazette* proposed that the king's birthday be celebrated in new suits manufactured in England – the homespun could be given to the poor. The directions of fashion could change quickly according to the political current.

The reconciliation following the repeal of the Stamp Act did not last. Haulman continues the investigation of American responses to Acts of Parliament intended to regulate and raise revenue from the colonies. The Townsend Acts brought forward more calls for non-importation on the part of the merchants and non-consumption on the part of the people. This continued discussion is anchored with the introduction of John Dickinson and his galvanizing, *Letters From a Pennsylvania Farmer*. Dickinson provides a recognizable point of reference as a plainspoken American, plain in appearance – despite the fact that he was from a very wealthy and landed Quaker family. Along with Dickinson's arguments, Haulman points out that this was one instance in which examples of economy set by women were recognized as influencing the behavior of men. Once again American manufacture was seen as a solution even though the boycotts met with some success. With the repeal of all duties except those on tea, boycotts were relinquished and consumerism returned full tilt. An abundance of goods and lower prices allowed even the lower classes to participate in the consumption of British goods, which created some confusion as fashion became less reliable as a means to assess status. One imported fashion that did distinguish elite women was the 'high role', which allowed hair dressing to reach unprecedented and outlandish heights. This fashion provides Haulman with the opportunity for one of the liveliest descriptions and discussions of style in this period, the build-up to revolution.

Haulman begins her account of fashion during America's revolt against Britain with the rather provocative statement that 'fashion was the center of political and cultural battles from 1774 to the conclusion of the American War of Independence' (p. 153). Up to this point in the book, she has given ample examples of the impact of fashion upon the social and economic profile of the American colonies, but the idea of fashion as being a decisive factor in the struggle for political sovereignty is more debatable. In formulating her argument Haulman focuses upon the city of Philadelphia as the major site for the culture wars that she claims as a factor in revolution. In a footnote she explains her definition of 'culture wars' as competing visions of society that incorporated religion, morality, education, gender, sexuality, the family, and the arts (p. 260, n. 1). Defined in this broader sense, fashion could be accepted as a factor in defining national purpose in the contest against Britain. The chapter includes examples of how dress became even more critical as a means of reading people through their appearance, as it served as an indicator of political leanings. When Philadelphia was occupied by the British in 1777–8, patriots were uneasy that the city's elite young women would form alliances with the British soldiers. Haulman uses the Meschianza, that celebrated day long extravaganza and ball staged by British Major John André to celebrate the departure of General Howe, as an excellent example of dress as identifying political loyalties. This incident also illustrates that the fears of patriot Philadelphians were not completely unreasonable. The attraction of the women of Philadelphia to military uniforms, whether Continental or British, produced notice and anxiety. These sketches provide a background for the author to further assess gender power and influence as the American colonies moved through war into nationhood.

The new nation faced many concerns, and Haulman contends that one was the appropriate look for a sovereign republic. What could distinguish them from British fashion? Then there was the question of the influence of their French allies. The basic issues did not seem to alter – there were still questions of domestic consumption, social order and the national economy. Women's fashions and gender roles continued to undergo scrutiny in terms of economics and a look compatible with republican simplicity. The book closes with an epilogue that attempts bring the story to the end of the century and to identify a transition in clothing that would come to define the 19th century. This brief discussion points to a new direction for fashion and its intersection with politics and brings closure chronologically, but it is too cursory to really address the profound changes taking place in politics and dress as a reflection of new concepts in governance. Perhaps a sequel?

Though fashion is Haulman's primary link for her discourse, nuanced references to specific items of dress

are not as well explained as her points on gender relations and the influence of trans-Atlantic commercialism. As an example, the identification of the growing popularity of the frock coat with the military uniforms of the French and Indian War is curious. The frock coat is more often identified by clothing historians as being rooted in the English countryside and evolving from a working-class, practical garment. It became popular among English country gentry for sporting occasions and later with refinement of cut and fabric made its way into city wear. The use of the corset as a metaphor in the epilogue to illustrate fashion's relationship to politics in the early American republic is thought provoking, but the reference to the corset as re-entering fashion in the 1790s is confusing, as it was never out of fashion in the 18th century. The English had preferred the term 'stays,' but the French term 'corset' began to be more commonly used by the end of the 18th century. The garment itself only underwent some modifications in shape and length.⁽¹⁾

Despite these quibbles, there is much to be learned from Haulman's work. Her discussions of gender power, the position of women within society, and the interplay with the commercial and political worlds are very well informed and insightful. A strong feature of the book is the use of anecdotes and episodes pulled from contemporary 18th-century literature, or from personal letters, diaries, journals, and accounting records, to enlarge upon or introduce a point of discussion. These help engage the reader and underscore the scholarly value of the work. Perhaps the greatest contribution of *The Politics of Fashion* is its perspective of 18th-century Anglo-American society from a fresh angle. The political events are familiar, but usually they are explained through the actions of statesmen and military leaders. Haulman's approach via gender and material culture offers a fresh and thought-provoking encounter with early American history.

Notes

1. Two older but very solid references to the development of the frock coat are found in C. Willett and Phillis Cunnington, *Handbook of English Costume in the 18th Century*, (London, 1964), pp. 16–20 & 193–203; and Nora Waugh, *The Cut of Men's Clothes* (London, 1964), pp. 53–4. For the use of the term corset see Valarie Cumming, C. W. Cunnington and P. E. Cunnington, *The Dictionary of Fashion History*, 2010 edition (London, 2010), alphabetically under 'corset'. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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