

## Writing Fashion in Early Modern Italy: From Sprezzatura to Satire

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**Author:** Eugenia Paulicelli

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The study of fashion is acknowledged to require a composite methodology. Daniel Roche, in his influential *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the 'ancien régime'* (1) put forward five headings under which dress could be interrogated: the artefact, textiles, pictorial representation, social and economic sources, and philological sources. Lou Taylor's *The Study of Dress History* (2) also sought to look at dress through a number of lenses, including artefact-based approaches, ethnographical approaches and those using oral history, social and economic history, and material culture, as well as the use of visual and literary sources. The works of Roche and Taylor, two very different scholars, indicate the potential in the vast and protean area of dress and fashion history. One aspect of this scholarship has focused on dress and fashion not in terms of real but rather as written garments. In *The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes identified image-clothing and written-clothing in relation to real clothing.(3) His primary interest lay in the written-garment, that which imposes meaning on the real garment.

All of three authors mentioned above have informed Paulicelli's approach but her work is perhaps closest to Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones' *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (4) in its use of visual and literary sources. Like *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, *Writing Fashion* may divide the opinion of those who read it. In the case of *Renaissance Clothing*, two reviews demonstrate the issues: that by Natasha Korda in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, and that by Margaret Scott in *Fashion Theory*. (5) Scott, a historian of dress and fashion, thoroughly excoriated Stallybrass and Jones's book largely on the basis of the authors' lack of in-depth knowledge of 'anything beyond the literary sources which are their basic bread and butter' and on 'basic errors of fact' (p. 339). Korda, whose research focuses on early modern English dramatic literature and theatre history, on the other hand, commented that '[t]he varied contents and contours of *Renaissance Clothing* are informed by its authors' complementary habits of mind, as are its breadth and brilliance' (p. 211). The two reviews certainly reflect the academic backgrounds of the authors and Scott was at pains to point out Stallybrass and Jones are literature experts and that dress has not been 'the major feature in their research so far'.

Like Stallybrass and Jones, Paulicelli is also a professor of comparative literature. She has published widely on fashion as author of *Fashion under Fascism: Beyond the Black Shirt*, and *Italian Style: Fashion and Film 1914 to the Present*, editor of *Moda e moderno, dal medioevo al rinascimento*, and co-editor, with Hazel

Clark, of *The Fabric of Cultures: Fashion, Identity, Globalization*.<sup>(6)</sup> Paulicelli is not, however, a historian of fashion in the sense espoused by Margaret Scott. This brings us back to the question implicit in a comparison of the two reviews cited above which, to state it perhaps over-simplistically, is that of interdisciplinarity or hybridity. Dress, clothing, fashion can be studied through a number of different disciplines. Indeed, one may argue, as Roche and Taylor have done, that it should be investigated in this way as it is only in this way that we can hope to reach an understanding of its full complexities. Such an approach may engender the danger of missing or misunderstanding something in fields that have become too large to be fully mastered by a single scholar. Equally, it has the potential to discover or expose things which are missed precisely by remaining in a single field.

The title of the book, *Writing Fashion*, indicates Paulicelli's focus on the literature of fashion. She is concerned with discourses on fashion in books such as Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, Cesare Vecellio's *Degli abiti antichi e moderni di diverse parti del mondo* (published in Italian in 1590, and an expanded Italian and Latin version in 1598), Agostino Lampugnani's *La Carrozza del nolo, ovvero del vestire e usanze alla moda* (first published in 1648), and the works of Arcangela Tarabotti (d. 1652). The book is divided into three sections: part one considers 'The cultures of fashion', part two looks at 'The fabric of cities', and part three discusses 'Fashion as excess'.

'The cultures of fashion', contains two chapters. The first, titled '*Moda and Moderno*', is a discussion of dress and fashion terminology in relation to political and temporal concerns. The chapter essentially provides an introduction to the book as a whole through relatively brief considerations of fashion in relation to culture and civility, the mechanisms through which fashions travelled, publications on dress and beauty, the regulation of clothing and expenditure, and the role of women in the evolution of fashions. Paulicelli then goes on to discuss Castiglione's *Il libro del cortegiano* (*The Book of the Courtier*), which was published in Venice in 1528. Her exploration lays out issues to which she returns throughout the book: vocabulary, in this case *sprezzatura*; the relationship of fashion and geographical or national boundaries; clothing and gender.

The second part moves beyond writing fashion to publications in which it was also illustrated. Vecellio's *Degli abiti antichi e moderni* of 1590 contains over 400 woodcuts accompanied by an explanatory text. The images, and an English translation of the text, have recently been made available in Margaret F. Rosenthal and Ann Rosalind Jones's *The Clothing of the Renaissance World: Cesare Vecellio's 'Habiti antichi e moderni'*.<sup>(7)</sup> As has been noted by Ulrike Ulg <sup>(8)</sup>, following the discovery of America, the opportunities for considering clothing and ornament within a geographical context were greatly expanded and the market for information about far flung lands led to the popularity of lavishly illustrated costume books. Vecellio took advantage of this opportunity and his *Habiti* covers various regions of Europe and the known world. He makes connections between dress and morals both in geographical and temporal terms. Paulicelli explores the notion of Vecellio's costume books as a way of 'mapping the world' but also as a way of surveying history. The second chapter in part two of *Writing Fashion* explores Giacomo Franco's early 17th-century costume plates. Franco's *Habiti d'huomeni e donne venetiane* is a mainly visual work. Unlike Vecellio's *Habiti antichi e moderni*, where each one-page plate is accompanied by a page of text, Franco's work has only a short sentence at the bottom of each of the engravings. Paulicelli argues that three works by Franco – the *Habiti*, *La città di Venetia con l'origine e governo di quella*, and *Habiti che già tempo usavano le donne vinetiane* – help us to understand Venice through 'fashion and its connection to the clothed body and urban space' (p. 128). The visual nature of much of the material, whilst it does not depart from Paulicelli's stated aim to focus 'on clothing and fashion as they are described and represented in literary texts and costume books in the Italy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' (p. 3) does raise questions about what is meant by the 'writing' fashion of the title. Are written-clothing and image-clothing distinct? How do they function, both separately and together?

Part three on 'Fashion as excess' starts with a chapter on the writing of the Venetian Benedictine nun Arcangela Tarabotti (d. 1652), focusing on her views on clothes and fashion in *Paternal Tyranny* and the *Antisatira*, a reply to Francesco Buoninsegni's *Contro il lusso donnesco* (1638). Paulicelli discusses the

ways in which Tarabotti's writings on fashion connect with those on tyranny through the theme of deception. The final chapter centres on the Milanese Agostino Lampugnani's *La Carrozza da nolo, ovvero del vestire e usanze alla moda* (*The rented carriage, or of clothing and fashionable habits*), first published in 1648. Paulicelli informs us that *La Carrozza* marks 'the first appearance of the word *moda* in the Italian lexicon' (p. 209). Indeed, one aspect of Lampugnani's scholarship was a concern with Italian language and grammar. Lampugnani uses *La Carrozza* to lambast overly enthusiastic adherence to the excesses of fashion. He criticizes the latest fashions as not only being in bad taste but, in some instances, also French (p. 211)! A number of fashionable items are lined up for ridicule: the *guardainfante* or farthingale, high-heeled shoes worn by men, skin-tight breeches, wigs and moustaches, for example. For Lampugnani, *la moda* was a troubling in that it upset the normal rules linking what was seen to what was known.

It is here, with fashion as a disconcerting thing which takes away from identity, with Italians following French fashion and men and women seeking to appear that which they are not, that Paulicelli ends her book. Her conclusion is succinct, and does not form a separate chapter: 'fashion establishes itself not only as a manifestation of everyday worldliness, but also of larger transformations in personal and collective identities, experiences of pleasure, eroticism and seduction, and ultimately of the politics of style' (p. 222). In fact the book warrants a more comprehensive conclusion for whilst much of it focuses on writing fashion, and it is here that Paulicelli is at her most confident and persuasive, a large part of it also deals with the visual representation of fashion and with the ways in which image and text work together. It would have been useful to enquired more specifically into the potentially different ways in which written-fashion, image-fashion, and written- and image-fashion in conjunction effect certain ends or engender certain meanings. More reflection on this would have been welcome as, as noted at the beginning of this review, one of the challenges of researching and writing about fashion is the need for a multi-disciplinary approach. The relevance of images to a book entitled *Writing Fashion* calls out for explanation and a stronger methodological basis. Here, perhaps, I return to the issues brought into focus by the two reviews of *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, a book which inspired me when I was researching my first monograph: the strengths and weaknesses of interdisciplinarity. I need to declare an interest here in that I am an artist and art historian by training. My mind is drawn towards the visual and whilst we may commonly, for better or worse, speak of 'reading' images we do not, as a rule, speak of 'writing' them. Dress and fashion can and should be investigated using a number of different disciplines. The challenge is how to bring them together productively in order to expand our understanding. Paulicelli's book forms part of this ongoing endeavour. The focus on 'writing' fashion allows the reader a fascinating insight into the ways in which dress shaped and was shaped by discourse which ranged much further than clothing the body.

## Notes

1. Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the 'ancien régime'* (New York, NY, 1994, originally published as *La Culture des apparences*, 1989).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Lou Taylor, *The Study of Dress History* (Manchester, 2002).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (New York, NY, 1983, originally published as *La système de la mode*, 1967), pp. 3–4.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge, 2001).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Natasha Korda, 'Review of *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 54, 2 (2003); Margaret Scott, 'Review of *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*', *Fashion Theory* 6, 3 (2002).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Eugenia Paulicelli, *Fashion under Fascism: Beyond the Black Shirt* (Oxford and New York, NY, 2004); Eugenia Paulicelli, *Italian Style: Fashion and Film 1914 to the Present* (forthcoming 2015); *Moda e moderno, dal medioevo al rinascimento*, ed. Eugenia Paulicelli (Rome, 2006); *The Fabric of Cultures: Fashion, Identity, Globalization*, ed. Hazel Clark and Eugenia Paulicelli (London and New York, NY, 2008).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Margaret F. Rosenthal and Ann Rosalind Jones, *The Clothing of the Renaissance World: Cesare Vecellio's 'Habiti antichi e moderni'* (London, 2008).[Back to \(7\)](#)

8. Ulrike Ulg, 'The cultural significance of costume books in sixteenth-century Europe', in *Clothing Culture, 1350–1650*, ed. Catherine Richardson (Aldershot, 2004), pp. 29–48.[Back to \(8\)](#)
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