

## Sweet and Clean? Bodies and Clothes in Early Modern England

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Students of history are not always aware when they live through major historiographic change; shifts are sometimes only recognizable in hindsight, with accumulated divergences sharply evident against the backdrop of the field. This volume by Susan North marks a historiographic advance from several perspectives, bringing questions of training, habit, labour, and lifestyle in early modern England into close conversation with health, fashion, morality, and materiality. Cleanliness—its presence and its absence—is the core focus. There has been some recent scholarship in this subject area, though laundry has generally been neglected. North's opening chapter is a salvo announcing the challenge to published precepts. A monograph on Victorian washerwomen launched the subject of laundry and labour, only to languish (Malcolmson, 1986). The French-centred chapter by Daniel Roche in *The Culture of Clothing* (1989, trans 1994), moved the topic forward, as Roche proposed 'the invention of linen', premised on ideas of cleanliness propounded by Georges Vigarello (1988) that, with the proliferation of linen from the 17th century, fabrics were to be washed, not bodies.<sup>(1)</sup> Virginia Sarah Smith offered a useful survey of the clean European body (2007), while Kathleen M. Brown (2009) and Sophie White (2012), historians of colonial America, advanced our understanding with landmark works exploring laundering as a racialized material system underpinning colonial societies, materialized in white-washing or its absence.<sup>(2)</sup> Susan North now offers a radical re-conceptualization of washed linens and bodies in early modern England. She is attentive to the power of material culture, and culture and economy more generally, successfully upending Vigarello's claims for unwashed early modern bodies as the norm.

Previous works built on Vigarello's arguments emphasized Europeans' supposed fear of bathing and their alternate dependence on clean linens to 'wash' the skin. North presents sophisticated and multi-part analyses exploring the practice of cleanliness in body and body-linen, in sickness and health, for infants and adults, for the poor, the ambitious, and the elites. She brings to this study a rare set of skills as a senior curator of fashion and textiles at the Victoria & Albert Museum, as well as a historian of this period. She uncovers insights previously unseen or unrecognized, demonstrating their importance in the culture, economy, and material life of this place and time. She also reveals the gendered knowledge and boundless labour that supported the culturally prescribed allegiance to 'sweet and clean.'

North acknowledges from the outset that 'historical testimony on hygiene is fraught with interpretative

difficulties (p. 17).’ As she later shows, habits acquired in childhood and enforced in youth are not generally recorded in diaries or accounts, except perhaps when a breach in standards was egregious. Cleanliness was necessarily a temporary, culturally constructed state and the labour invested in maintaining this status is typically female, unlettered, and low rank. The current pandemic has caused many to re-examine the category of ‘essential worker,’ and consider the mass of labourers performing largely difficult and anonymous tasks. In the early modern period ‘essential labour’ meant endless travails to achieve cleanliness, in all its meanings. To uncover written records of this extensive and unending industry, North turns to an array of sources, from conduct books to medical treatises, from probate inventories to tracts on child rearing and military readiness, all of which are enhanced by close study of surviving shirts and shifts (of which there are few). Conduct books focused on the essential state of cleanliness from the 16th century onwards, where the aesthetics of the clean body, plus visible and invisible linens, defined the Elizabethan gentleman and, later, the early 18th-century Quaker woman. Male and female youth were enjoined to keep a cleanly state. Printed instructions doubtless reiterated the injunctions of nurses, mothers, and teachers of various sorts. Genteel (male) authors sometimes amassed this ephemeral knowledge by tracking their servants and noting the priorities they assigned to tasks, recording these activities, as with early cookery and household management books. Readers of conduct books were instructed in the basics of early modern visible and invisible garments: shirts (and occasionally drawers) for men, shifts for women and linen hose for both, along with a plethora of fashionable and visible linen accessories for the wrists, neck, and head. ‘Visible’ and ‘invisible’ were defining categories of linens. North’s deep knowledge of the materials of this era sets her apart from those who may turn to illustrative evidence (or may simply rely on written records), with little knowledge of what underpinned the coat or gown or the collective systems that maintained these things. Her perception is evident in the astute interpretations of print and archival sources, assessed through material understanding.

North hunted through an extraordinary breadth of published tracts, from dictionaries to child-care manuals, to uncover what was reasonably expected from generation to generation. Her attention to infants and children is especially apt. Of course, the handling and care of babies varied across ranks in terms of material resources. But the fundamentals appear to be shared: keep the infant ‘sweet and clean’ and change the clouts (diapers / nappies) as needed. These agreed standards were enacted by mindful nurses and nursery maids given the care of infants. Common principles aligned: (1612) that infants ‘be shifted, as soone as they have foul’d themselues (p. 84);’ (1673) ‘washing and changing “at least twice or thrice a day, and also sometimes in the night (p. 84);’ and that (1762) ‘the child should be washed every morning with water made luke-warm, and then well rubbed and dried (p. 85).’ However, few actual accounts listed the clouts employed in family domiciles, a basic linen cloth, recycled into rags. Six clouts were a bare minimum, with preference given to at least a dozen. Infants left naked to the air for want of clean garments signalled profound neglect. Overt discussion of potty training was absent: perhaps writers assumed everyone knew that such training began at six months of age. Certainly, child care regimes changed markedly across the younger years, with the constant goal of cleanliness in body and clothes. Susan North is sensitive and diligent in her hunt for evidence. She demonstrates that the aim of ‘sweet and clean’ began in babyhood for much of the population, with expectations that sufficient resources to achieve this would be provided even for the parish poor.

What role did linen play, as the second skin, during periods of serious sickness? North plumbs medical treatises for priorities in treating illnesses and the understanding of relationships between the skin’s pores and the effluvia absorbed by the shirt in the midst of fever. Advice varied and concerns differed, from the soap used to wash sick patients’ linens to the dangers of potential dampness of sheets and shirts. Texts circulated in translations from the continent, including an Italian volume republished in English in 1705, in which the author declared that he: ‘can’t decry enough that vulgar Opinion which even some Physicians entertain, that sick People must not shift their Shirts or Sheets for Fear of becoming thereby weaker (p. 65).’ Shifting linen was widely understood as healthful. Washing body linen (and even invalid bodies) —and thereby removing odours—was understood as beneficial as well, at times. A greater unanimity among medical writers was achieved at the end of the 1700s, especially among those who dealt with the poor and with massed contingents of military and naval personnel. As well, linen (rather than wool flannel) was

determined to be better next to the skin for working populations, as John Howard declared in 1789: ‘more easily washed, and not so retentive of scents’ (p. 80). North explores medical debates and arguments about the best treatment of those with smallpox or fevers, acknowledging as well that custom might take precedent over theory in household events.

Europe was increasingly awash with ‘linens’ of various kinds—stipulated by North as including fabrics made of flax, hemp, and cotton. England sat amidst this plenty, with myriad policies determining the flow of goods from the heaviest canvas to the finest lawn. The historiography on this subject is vast and deeply researched; however, much less attention has been given to the inevitable need to manage these fabrics, including the complex mechanics of washing, bleaching, blueing, and starching so that the materials and garments achieved their intended purpose. These systems of technology became increasingly important even as white linen became increasingly desirable. Whiteness was the aim, an ephemeral quality that was only achieved by those with the resources to buy cloth with the desired features and employ women (and it was predominantly women) to ensure that linens reached their required form. Susan North details the ownership of linen using probate inventories and probate administrations—the latter more useful as they outline running accounts for the expenses of minor children, including their necessary clothes. While probate inventories are acknowledged as somewhat unreliable, they demonstrate long-run trends, encapsulated by North’s statement that:

As prosperity and status increased, so did the linens, with visible accessories growing in greater proportion to the invisibles, and women owned a greater range of linen accessories than men (p. 151).

The strengths and weaknesses of probate inventories are well known. But, details can illuminate the cultural authority of linen within virtually all ranks. Take William Poyner, for example, an 18th-century clerk of modest means with three flaxen shirts at his death; but it was his four linen sleeves that helped give him the *appearance* of clean linen. Shifting linen was a term widely employed. However, if resources did not allow someone to ‘shift’ as often as they wished, linen sleeves and collars could suggest a greater abundance of whole garments than was actually the case. At times I wished for a table or a graph to help visualize the tremendous diversity of owners and goods owned, as well as some of the social determinants that shaped linen priorities. The rich detail in wealthy probate listings contrasts with the humble, but ever-present, items found even among the poor. Consider the fact that parish authorities agreed to minimum standards of linen for needy residents, for decency’s sake: two shirts for men and two shifts for women annually, both of which would be invisible to the eye. Recipients of poor relief were also given visible markers of respectability: headwear and handkerchiefs, as well as aprons. Linens in countless changing forms adorned head, neck, and wrists. Indeed, accessories were perhaps more vital to self-presentation than the secret state of one’s hidden garments.

The author provides a survey of the making of linens, a subject that may be a useful reminder for those familiar with this field or a primer for those without that background. To my eye, the more engrossing sections were those addressing the sewing and washing of linens, a challenging topic involving many visible and invisible parts. North provides insightful analyses of the technologies of making at a time when paper patterns were unknown and skill in cutting was central to careful management. The few printed instructions on the thrifty cutting-out of shirts perhaps did not travel far among the countless unlettered seamstresses and home sewers of that era. But they demonstrate the attention given this most important and ubiquitous of tasks—turning fabric rectangles into shirts and shifts. Households at every level, but also the major institutions of the age, dressed their members using these vital skills, and some profited mightily from the process. At another level were the linen confections that decorated the necks and wrists of royalty and the elites. The early 17th century portrait of a lady in a lace collar (Figure 1) offers an example of the sort of vertical linen lacework that, once made, was remade with every wash. Each laundering required a remodelling of the collar. Seamstresses inside and outside great households, as well as female milliners, provided items such as collars—though perhaps few as luxurious as this example. They materialized fads

and fashions for both sexes and were the most skilled of their trade. But needlework, like laundering, was a notoriously unstable source of employment. The insecurity and impermanence of seamstress labour is matched by the transient state of starched ruffs, caps, and collars that marked this period.

Susan North saves the best for last, in her thoughtful assessment of laundering, the most invisible and ephemeral of the techniques addressed in this volume. Washing tools were often indistinguishable from kitchen equipment in probate inventories. However, the architectural innovation of domestic washhouses proves incontrovertibly the importance given to ‘sweet and clean;’ while thefts from washerwomen documented in criminal records confirm the busy labours of women working to reverse the effects of everyday dirt. Soap mattered. Water mattered too. Compromises were made by those with few options; sweet-smelling soap and sweet country air were the choice of elites who sent their linens for washing in the country. But English cities were filled with women willing to wash for those who could pay. Recall that Francis Place, the tailor turned radical, described the straits of his mother in the late 1700s when at ‘nearly sixty years of age she became a washer-woman.’ She washed the ‘great quantities of linen’ carried back to London by East India Company families.<sup>(3)</sup> This labour defines the word ‘drudgery,’ used by North on occasion to denote the work done by legions of washerwomen. Aside from soap and water, starch was vital at particular stages of the laundering process, as its correct deployment could create translucent three-dimensional accessories. The better the starch and the fabric, and the more skilled the starcher, the better the outcome. A ‘clear starcher’ to the royal household was honoured by a print depicting her labours: ‘Miss White, Clear Starcher to the Queen.’ (Figure 2) The ruffle suspended between her hands suggests the skilful prestidigitation to come; while the linens she is wearing epitomized her attention to style. Equally intriguing were the painstaking adjustments made to gentlemen’s shirtsleeves as jacket styles became tighter towards the end of the 1700s. How could a voluminous shirt fit in a tight-fitting jacket? Susan North sought out the few remaining 18th-century shirts for careful analysis and found evidence of a laboriousness that gives one pause:

pleats were made by finely gathering the linen, probably over lengths of straw. This could only have been done after the shift or shirt had been washed and dried. Once gathered, the sleeved needed to be dampened, lightly starched, the pleats set and then ironed. The gathering threads (and any straw) were removed before wearing and, of course, the pleats vanished in the next wash and had to be re-set (pp. 232-3).

The unending nature of washing exemplifies the culture and politics of the era, as all who could strived for some material order. Susan North makes the case for determined material and physical care.

This history needed writing, including the analysis of surviving objects with a knowledgeable and critical eye. Although few shirts outlived their hard wear, many linen accessories fill museum shelves, and historians are unpacking the lives and skills of their makers, sellers, and buyers. Is there room for additional studies, perhaps with a regional focus in mind, or the study of select object communities, including the key intervention of laundering? As well, the example of Francis Place’s mother suggests the imperial dimensions of this history waiting to be explored. Is there an imperial history of laundering waiting to be written, one as resonant as the present volume? White linen was a major cultural marker to which generations devoted money, attention, and labour, then ideally fitted over a washed body. Susan North has powerfully recast the context in which we understand ‘sweet and clean.’

## Notes

1. Daniel Roche, *The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the ‘ancien régime’*, trans. Jean Birrell. (Cambridge, 1994); Georges Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell. (Cambridge, 1988).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Virginia Sarah Smith, *Clean: A History of Personal Hygiene and Purity*. (Oxford, 2007); Kathleen M.

Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America*. (New Haven, 2009); Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana*. (Philadelphia, 2012).[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. Francis Place, *The Autobiography of Francis Place, 1771-1854*, ed. Mary Thale. (Cambridge, 1972), 99.[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

## IMAGES (see on [homepage](#) [2])

**Figure 1:** Portrait of a Lady in a Black Dress with a Lace Collar. Follower of Robert Peake the Elder (1551-1619). Wikimedia

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Follower\\_of\\_Robert\\_Peake\\_the\\_Elder\\_Portrait\\_of\\_a\\_Lady\\_in\\_a\\_lace\\_collar](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Follower_of_Robert_Peake_the_Elder_Portrait_of_a_Lady_in_a_lace_collar) [3]

**Figure 2:** Mezzotint, anonymous, c. 1750-1800. 1902,1011.7360. British Museum, London. Creative Commons. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/605246001> [4]

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[4] <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/605246001>