

The elizabethan dress code essay sample



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INTRODUCTION

Queen Elizabeth was not only a political icon but also a fashion icon. In this paper, we will try to look into the various aspects of the Elizabethan period, particularly their fashion. A brief discussion of England's social background was also included for the purpose having an idea of how this background contributed to the fashion of the period. The discussion was divided according to the dress code for men and women. It is further subdivided into sections that explore the period's fashion from the dress, accessories to jewelry.

BACKGROUND OF THE ELIZABETHAN PERIOD

Relative to the Elizabethan way of clothing, it is important to have a background on the social set up of the England society in order to understand the reasons why such laws as the Sumptuary Laws and the Statutes of Apparel were enforced." England was then based on the concept of The Great Chain of Being" (M. Anderson). This concept maintains that everyone in the society has his or her own position ordained by God. This concept therefore necessarily means that whatever position anyone holds in the society is to be well-maintained since it is believed to be the will of God. This concept places God on top of the chain of positions and next to Him is the Queen. The chain then continues on a descending order, regarded according to their degrees of importance in the society. This social order generally composed of the nobles, the middles class and the lowest in the chain, the peasants.

The Nobles were the highest individuals in the society of England. Nobles were composed of the Queen and her family and her immediate attendants- knights, countesses, earls and the others. They are the persons who literally have so much wealth that they can afford to wear bright-colored attires covered with jewels. Following the chain, the Queen always was to be the best-dressed among them. There are several historical studies that say that the jewelries in the clothing of the nobles during Elizabeth's reign were valued at hundreds of thousands of dollars today. With the dress alone, we can say that this group of people must have been really wealthy.

England's Middle class society was divided into two: the middle class and the wealthy middle class. Middle class people composed were composed of the small merchants, craftsmen, the artisans and their servants. Although they can practically afford to wear fashionable clothing, there were often dressed with less ornaments and jewels. Still, their social status reflected on their fashion since they dress up in a way that still says that they have money to spend on such clothing. Their servants necessarily dress up in lively uniforms because their employers can practically provide them. On the other hand, the wealthy middle class were composed of the wealthy merchants, the servants of the nobles and the highly skilled artisans, who dress up more fashionably than the rest of the members of the middle class.

Being at the lowest of the chain, the Peasants were the ones whose clothing was designed for practicality. This class, composed of the families of agricultural laborers spends their whole lives in service of the nobles.

THE SUMPTUARY LAWS AND THE STATUTES OF APPAREL

Sumptuary Laws were as old as the 17th century and back from the Roman Empire. Sumptuous is a derivation of the Latin word “sumptuaris”, originally came from “sumptus” meaning, expense and “sumere” which means “spend”. These Sumptuary Laws are intended to regulate the citizens’ behavior on the grounds of morality and religion, especially those that are relative to personal spending. These laws encompass daily expenditures like furniture, jewelry and clothing, including food and beverages. On June 15, 1574, Queen Elizabeth I enforced laws relative to the people’s clothing expenditures. These laws called the Statutes of Apparel were detailed guides on the allowed and disallowed manners of dressing up for both men and women and for all the different classes of the England society.

During the Medieval Period, England was governed by the powerful Feudal System of governance. The English people were well-versed with the Sumptuary Laws and were so much faithful in their compliance with such laws for the reason that they how harsh their penalties would be if they failed to do so. Such penalties range from fines, the loss of their properties, their title in the government and even of losing their own lives. From these, we can say that the English people during this time are forced to behave well, even to the smallest detail of dressing up. With the Feudal System and the enforcement of the Sumptuary Laws, England can distinguish everyone’s social status especially when the Statutes of Apparel were endorsed. Fashion during this time was dictated by the power of the Feudal System. With the fall of the system after the Bubonic Plague, King Henry continued with the enforcement of the Sumptuary Laws, updated them and has kept the upper

classes of the Nobility separate from the rest of the populace until the reign of her daughter, Queen Elizabeth I.

MATERIALS AND COLORS USED IN THE ELIZABETHAN CLOTHING

Even the fabrics and the colors used in the Elizabethan era were indicators of the wearer's status in the society. Using natural dyes, the colors used in their clothing range from green, yellow, blue, red, brown and gray. Since brown and gray colors are generally cheap, fabrics with these colors are often regarded as the ones used by the poor.

Elizabethan clothing was typically made from wool and linen although the wealthy ones could afford of cotton, silk and satin leather. Since linen fabrics were easy to clean and easily dry, these were the usual materials used for underwear, shirts, collars and hose. Wool was then one of the major sources of income for England. Wool was used in the Elizabethan clothing for few practical reasons: it is water-resistant, easy to dye, and is versatile in a way that it becomes warm during cold weather and becomes cold during warm weather. A durable fabric called canvas was practically used as durable material for shirts but of course less comfortable.

Silk are finer fabrics which are expensive so that the wealthy individuals during this time can afford to have silk as materials for their clothing. Silk was used for fine shirts and as embroidery for stockings. The less expensive fabric called satin was used for the outer layers of the dress. Leather was used as materials for shoes, hats, belts, gloves and other miscellaneous items like doublets and breeches.

DRESS CODE FOR WOMEN

It was the goal of every woman in the Elizabethan era to make her as attractive as possible. “ The goal of women’s fashion was to show the woman’s status in society” (S. Bridges, et. al). The Elizabethan women’s special taste in fashion was evident during the 16th century where the wealthy gave special attention and spend much on their clothes. Because their dress defines their social status, every woman during this time desired to be well-dressed. What makes Elizabethan clothing notable is that “ the costume worn in these years was the richest ever seen in the history of fashion” (H. Hines and L. Fischer).

Women’s dress during the Elizabethan era comes in three layers: the shift, the petticoats and the gowns. The shift was put on first which was similarly cut with that of a man’s shirt. There were two petticoats worn by women of which the outer layer necessarily contrasts in color with that of the gown. Women’s gown was worn in two ways; either fastened in front or laced at the back. The dress has to be square and low in front and V-shaped or U-shaped at the back. Elizabethan dresses were also distinctive of its furred characteristics and of being heavily embroidered. Gold, silver chains and precious stones were used as ornaments and decorations of the women’s gowns.

Women during this era wore gowns with puffy sleeves, full and appear as bell-shaped. The plain full sleeves were then popular although a different style called “ split sleeve” became popular in the early 15th century. There were also sleeves worn which were just tied at some points in the shoulder.

Those who wore dress with ruffles were those of the wealthy class of the English society. The ruffle was an element in the women's dress that defines hierarchy. Ruffles were also worn to display a woman's charm. This was referred to as the " Seduction Principle." What was distinctive of their fashion was that women styled their gowns and dresses in a way that will make their waist appear smaller than their actual size. In order to make this possible, they made use of bombast or padding as stuffing in their doublets and hose. The bombast maybe made of rags, cotton, bran, flock and horsehair.

Women during this era were not only detailed with the styles of their gowns but also with their accessories. The gloves they used were made of silk, velvet or cheverill. These gloves were sometimes cut at the knuckles and were also scented. Hose worn by women were dyed in different colors worn to match with the shoes. " Belts and girdles were also a necessary part of the woman's dress" (J. Nunn). From the girdle also hung items such as keys. Women also carry with them hand mirrors and fans with silver handle aside from the black velvet they used as sun shields. Their shoes were distinct of its square-shaped toe. Stockings were also important element in the Elizabethan clothing. These were usually embroidered with green, red and black although it also came in white. There were also cases wherein the embroidered or colored stockings were worn over the white ones. Riders made use of the boot hose are protective stockings made of linen. Over-the-knee stockings were worn by women in the middle and upper classes.

DRESS CODE FOR MEN

Men's wardrobe was also dictated by the power of the Queen's Statutes of Apparel. For the peasant man, their shirt must be made from linen, cut in rectangular pieces and is to be at thigh length, pulled over to the head and must have the mid chest opening with a neckband (M. Anderson). It may either be tied or buttoned, maybe with or without collar and must have long, full sleeves with cuffs. Breeches must be knee length worn with the jerkin that was thigh length with deep V neck or high round. Sleeves were kept as separate garments and their cloaks were made of wool.

"Noblemen's shirts could be literally covered in black work, drawn thread work, and other types of needlework, sometimes further embellished with gold thread or small beads, pearls, or gems" (M. Anderson). Their pants or what they then call as nether hose were knee-length either buttoned or tied on the knee or the other type which are mid-thigh in length. Their breeches were padded and were decorated at the top layer. Their jackets called doublets have high necklines and a standing collar. Cloaks have straight collars of fur and were often decorated. Middle class men also wear gowns usually made of wool, velvet or silk lined with fur. They also wear tights, or nether stocks out of knitted wool or silk.

THE ELIZABETHAN JEWELRY

As with the dress and gowns, the Elizabethan era also has its provisions for jewelry for the different classes in the England society. One notable fashion feature of the era was the law that regulates piercing, which was then limited only for the earlobes. Elizabethan Statutes of Apparel required that ear piercing for men be on one ear only and for both ears on women. Aside

from earrings, there were also other jewelry that, as with the materials and colors for dress and gowns were worn for recognition of the societal status.

The upper class and the noble's jewelry include bracelets, pendants, brooches, rings and buttons. During this period, gold is considered the most precious and pearls as the dominant gem. Necklace was already worn but was called "*carcanet*". Styles and shapes of gems associated with the jewelry worn were commonly inspired by nature. Brooches were usually in shapes of beasts and ships or tiny paintings of political figures or their loved ones. Buttons were usually worn as decorations on the dress, sewn on sleeves and doublets. Glass beads were new fashion items during this era. It is worth a special mention that the rings worn in this era were in all fingers except in the middle finger. Through the "collars of office", government officials were required to wear a collar in the form of a heavy chain and plaque necklaces with seals and insignia. Pewter was the material used by the wealthy people during this period. Pomanders were also included in their list of jewelries. Pomanders were used as fashionable containers of potpourri and fragrances. It commonly came in round metal boxes with a hinge to open. *Aiglets* and buttons were also used as holders of fragrances.

For the lower orders, peasants' jewelry was usually made from carved wood. It commonly came in the form of a small cross hung in a ribbon, cord or leather thong. Beads were made from clay, wood or bones. There was then a notable earrings design for the sailors. They always wear gold hoop earrings which they believed will be their fair ticket in the underworld. The middle class jewelry was made of pewter, semiprecious stones and imitation of pearls.

THE ELIZABETHAN ACCESSORIES

Hats were common accessories for all ages in the Elizabethan period. They have what they call "*coif*" or "*biggin*" made from white linen that were made fitted on the head with strings used to tie the cap under the chin. The "*caul*" was worn by the middles and upper class women which served as hair net, sometimes jeweled and highly decorated but also worn as under cap in casual occasions. There was also a heart-shaped cap they called "*attifet*" worn in association with Mary, Queen of Scots. For the peasants, the caul comes in a muffin cap or bag hat with a point in the forehead for women and with a straight band for men. They were made from linen in white and different colors. The flat cap was worn by all ages usually as a riding hat. For the wealthy merchants, tall hats were common usually worn over coif and caul for women. Aside from the above mentioned, hats also include the French Hood style hat, the pillbox and the Solano or sun hat.

Belts were also included in the list of Elizabethan accessories. For the peasants, their belts were made from leather and cloth to serve as tools holder. The buckles were plain shaped like a ring or in a D-shape also maybe made forged iron or cast brass. For the noblemen, narrow belts were worn styled with additional straps and hangers for the swords. Women wore belts with decorations and with soft fabric sash.

Pouches were made from leather or fabric. They came in rectangular and oblong shapes. Baskets were common accessories for the servants of the middle class women for marketing and sewing projects. Shoes have low heels made from leather which maybe laced and decorated with jewels or

were embroidered. There were also “*chopines*” styled with high platforms for the purpose of elevating the women out of the muddy ground. Horsemen wore boots with moderate heels with mid-thigh length and round toes.

Ruffs were made as small ruffles on the neck and wristbands. Initially, Elizabethan ruffs were worn as close collar but later developed into a wider and flatter appearance like that of a fan-shaped collar. Gloves were made from soft leather, embroidered and jeweled in black, white, tan and brown colors. Gloves were usually worn by the upper class women. Flea furs, knives, swords, daggers, cups, tankards and goblets were also styled accessories during this period.

INFLUENCE OF THE ELIZABETHAN ERA IN THE MODERN FASHION

There is no else but Queen Elizabeth that deserves commendation on the influence of her era on the modern English fashion. There are studies that say that the Queen’s astounding fashion rooted from her childhood life (D. Lead). Stories said that the Queen had been deprived of the beautiful wardrobes when she was a child and so when she was given the chance and the power to have the most beautiful and elegant wardrobes in the land, she did taken the opportunity to have them all. Although there can be found a significance on of such event in the Elizabethan fashion, if the story is proven true, there are more important reasons we can draw out from her life story. The Queen has purposely used her own dress code for political ends and of course, to merely impress the people for both her power and beauty as a Queen.

As obviously projected by the expensive fabrics and jewelries in her gowns, Elizabeth did showed her political power and wealth. While the Queen enjoys the benefit of impressing people, the rest crave and desire to have such beauty and resources to avail of the Queen's fashion. Because of her known love for dress and gowns and anything relative to fashion, people around the world came to her to bring in different gowns and dress for her as gifts. That way, the designer's taste of fashion designs eventually had the effort of making something different that will impress the Queen. The other ladies in the land eventually copied her fashion-her dress, accessories and her favorite silk hose. Despite the absence of magazines and photographs and fashion shows, the Queen's fashion gained significant influence on the fashion during her reign and the years after.

CONCLUSION

By exploring the different aspects of the Elizabethan era fashion, we were able to have an idea of how fashion in the said period has been carried out for the purpose of maintaining the social class of England. We have also found out that fashion in the said era were not only for the purpose of enhancing the beauty of the English people but also a means of displaying the political power of those on government seats especially that of the Queen. By using the Statutes of Apparel as a guide, we were able to identify the specific material, style and colors that were appropriate for each class and for both sexes. To summarize, we can say that the Elizabethan period has indeed a colorful era in fashion history.

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