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Rhetoric of Clothing in Medieval London

Clothing says more about a person than their actual body, but clothing does not reveal the stories or secrets of one's past. Therefore, any person in London was able to tell what another person's job or role in society was based on the clothes they were wearing; "What medieval people put on when they got dressed in the morning depended not just on gender but also on station" (Vanhoutte 149). Everyone in London, no matter who you are, participated in this idea of fashion, but, the color and material of a person's clothes allowed other people to make assumptions about their social standing. However, this freedom of fashion that Londoners had became abused by many of the working class people. *The Regiment of Princes*, by Thomas Hoccleve, includes a rant by an old man who criticizes the way that young, working-class, men have started to dress. He is frustrated with the idea that young men, who are not extremely wealthy, are spending all of their money on expensive clothes that lords or nobles would wear. The reason behind this action is so that they appear wealthy and belong to an upper status. Furthermore, the old man's frustration is fueled by the idea that there is no clear social hierarchy in London because of this action. Furthermore, no one can tell who is truly wealthy and who is 'wasting' all of their money on clothes to present themselves as wealthy. This criticism towards the young, working-class people, emphasizes the idea that the material and color of one's clothing should be a true representation of a person's role in society for there to be a clear distinction between the wealthy and the poor. Ultimately, it is important to understand the

meaning behind the color and material of a person's clothing and how it identifies them to a certain group; therefore, this knowledge of fashion allows readers to understand why the old man, in *The Regiment of Princes*, is so frustrated with the idea that working young men are dressing how noble people would.

In *A Companion to Chaucer and his Contemporaries* Laurel Amtower and Jacqueline Vanhoutte describe fashion in London and how it varies from person to person, "Clothing of any sort was going to be expensive during the Middle Ages, but fashionable clothing was prohibitively expensive" (151). Bright colors, such as red and blue, were often associated with the nobles, but some colors such as purple were restricted to only the royal family. However, peasants' budgets did not allow for this high fashion and constant change in clothing; "Most peasants wore individual pieces until they became frayed, faded, and torn. Being poor meant looking drab in the Middle Ages" (Vanhoutte 150). Fashion was straightforward in London, but progressively got more complicated as people's means increased. Therefore, it was very easy to tell the difference between a noble and a peasant solely based on what that person was wearing.

This idea was allowed because of the Sumptuary laws, passed in 1363. These laws dictated who could wear what according to a person's social class because before then one could barely distinguish the poor from the rich, the servant from the master, or the priest from any other man. Yeomen, for example, were restricted to cloth worth 40 shillings or less and were expressly forbidden to wear ornamentation, like jewelry or embroidered material. The goal of the Sumptuary laws was to make a clear divide between the nobles and the local workers, and without the laws, people would not be able to infer what a person's job or social standing was solely based on the clothes that they were wearing. However, a year after 1363 these laws were repealed because people realized they were unenforceable. Ultimately, no one was truly able to

convince people that they should not use clothes to communicate their worth. This caused many issues in society because the 'powerful' working class began to dress like their lords. Therefore, the social hierarchy is slowly eliminated since people are spending money on clothes that they are unable to afford to look like they belong to a higher status.

In *The Regiment of Princes*, it is easy to understand where the old man's frustration comes from. After the Sumptuary Laws were repealed no one could tell who was truly wealthy or not; furthermore, it is important to recognize this in his rant:

"Sumtyme afer men mighten lordes knowe

By hir array from othir folk, but now

A man shal studie and musen a long throwe

Which is which. O lordes, it sit to yow

Amende this, for it is for your prow;

If twixt yow and your men no difference

Be in array, lesse is your reverence" (442-448).

Since there are no laws, he says that once men could distinguish the difference between the common person and their lord just by looking at them. Now since these young boys are starting to dress like their lords it is impossible. He highlights this when he says, "A man shal studie and musen a long throwe" which means that a man must sit and reflect with the person to figure out how much wealth they have rather than just assuming what they do base on their clothes. He then speaks to the lords and expresses to them how embarrassing it should feel to have their 'servants' imitating them: "If twixt yow and your men no difference/ Be in array, lesse in your reverence." Meaning that if there is no difference in appearance between you and your men, then no one will respect you. The repeal of the Sumptuary Laws of 1363 helps readers to understand where this

criticism is coming from. Before the repeal, no one questioned the status of another because every person was dressing the way that they were 'told.' Therefore, it is important to recognize how the repeal of these laws affected the social hierarchy. The rant helps readers understand why the old man cares so much about men dressing the way that the Sumptuary laws of 1363 said to, but this also shows how crucial of a role clothing played in defining someone's job or role in society. The rhetoric of clothes in these lines ultimately is meaningless because it is no longer identifying people with wealth.

Color was one of the easiest ways to identify a person's social status; "Peasants also revealed their status by the colors they most often wore— white or gray garments, left undyed, or blue, produced by dyeing clothes in woad, the cheapest dye used in the Middle Ages" (Vanhoutte 150). Therefore, some of the working class wore bright colors because the dye was cheap to produce. The process of dying was done in a very simple fashion: pots over an open fire. This made it easy and accessible for all classes to produce bright-colored clothing. "Most dyes were made from plants growing freely in the countryside or garden, such as madder (red) and woad (indigo)" (Elgin 46-47). Madder was much more expensive than woad because the plant that is required to make the red dye was only harvested once a year.

Elgin highlights that although the nobles dominated the medieval fashion scene, the commoners, including the middle class, servants, and country folk, highly outnumbered them (Stepankova 26). The middle class tried to catch up with the nobility by wearing the same clothes, but since they were unable to afford what the nobility was wearing they used cheaper materials. Elgin demonstrates how the townspeople would dress in the Middle Ages and gives an illustrated example. She assumes:

By the 1400s, the average townsman would be wearing a knee-length houppelande with

wide sleeves and a high collar, made of wool and perhaps dyed a deep russet. His wife would be wearing a modest V-necked houppelande with wide revers and narrow fitted sleeves. Gathered with a high buckled belt, it might be lifted in front to reveal an underskirt. (Elgin 41).

Russet is a reddish brown color that was very popular during this time. Many common people and nobles would wear shades of red, but not peasants. It was harder to identify the difference between the nobles and the lower class based on color. Elgin specifies not only the color choices of townspeople but also the fabric that they are wearing. Therefore, many people would be able to tell what another person's social status was based on the material of the clothing that they were wearing rather than just the color.

Scarlet, the color red was very common in Medieval London, but scarlet is also a fabric. This caused great confusion among clothing inventories in London because the scarlet color was often misinterpreted. Scarlet, the fabric, was very expensive and limited to only the highest people in society. It was “by far the most highly esteemed, most regal colour in medieval Europe, especially during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, was that shade of brilliant or vivid red known as scarlet; and by far the most expensive woolen textiles (rivaling imported silks) of this era were the scarlets, everywhere— in the Low Countries, England Spain, Italy” (Robin 56). Furthermore, “The word “scarlet” is derived from Old French ‘escarlante’ (itself derived from low Latin and Persian). Scarlet cloth was produced in red, white, blue, green, and brown colours, among others. The most common colour was carmine-red though, which resulted in the double meaning of the word as a colour designation” (Chadwick). It would have been very common to see the King in scarlet:

“In 1486, Henry VII visited the town of York. Eager to make a good impression, the

mayor sent out a decree stating what each person on the welcoming committee should wear. He and the senior members of the council would be wearing long scarlet gowns, while the more junior council members and the city clerk would be in violet and chamberlains (managers of the great households) in murrey (purple-red)” (Elgin 55).

Scarlet cloth represented wealth, and any person who was wearing it would be recognized as an important person within society. Therefore, it is clear that the material of a person's clothing makes it very easy for any person to identify what social class they are in, or what their job may be.

Dressing in red often symbolized importance, and many kings would be seen wearing the specific red, scarlet. The dye process for scarlet was made from the insect Kermes. It comes from a dried female scale insect in the genus Kermes, specifically Kermes Vermilio. Kermes was found in the Mediterranean region and lived on the sap of Kermes oak which was not only rare to get, but also expensive. However, the very poor people left their hand-made clothes natural so any person would quickly be able to identify a peasant because of their naturally colored clothing. One of the biggest differences between the peasants, working people, and nobility was the presence of color. The working class wore cheaper home-dyed fabrics using local plant-based dyes, while the noble wore professionally dyed fabrics that used expensive imported ingredients. Although, the dye that the noble wore was much more expensive— an outside person would not be able to tell the difference between the working class and nobility without knowing the material of their clothes. It is important to note the difference between the commoners' clothing and the noble's clothing because they look very similar.

The color and material of a person's clothes say how much wealth they have in society. The old man in *The Regiment of Princes* agrees with the idea that materials and colors should

display the wealth of a person in society, but it is only fair if everyone follows this idea. He does not think that fashion is a bad thing as long as you are worthy of wearing a certain color or material. The rant begins with him saying that working men are abusing fashion by wearing materials that only the nobles can afford; he says:

“But this me thynkith an abusioun,	abuse
To see oon walke in gownes of scarlet	a person
Twelve yerdes wyde, with pendaunt sleeves down	hanging
On the ground, and the furroure therin set,	fur lining
Amountyng unto twenti pound or bet.	Or more
And if he for it paid have, he no good	paid; money
Hath left him wherwith for to bye an hood” (421-427)	buy

The man notices how common scarlet has become and says that he believes that this is an abuse of fashion since this is a description of what a Lord of the manner would wear mainly on ceremonial occasions. A men’s Houppelande “was worn belted at the natural waist. The seams, at the front back, and each side were left open as vents, frequently high at the waist. The sleeves fell into huge funnels at the wrist and often trailed on the ground. The houppelande was always lined, usually with fur, and normally trimmed” (Elgin 24). As noted above, scarlet is one of the most precious materials in London; therefore, it is not affordable to every man in society and is ultimately reserved for the wealthiest in society. Therefore, it is easy to understand why the man is mad since scarlet is such a precious thing. This is truly an abuse of fashion by the working class people because this beautiful material no longer has value. After all, these ‘poor’ men are wearing it. Furthermore, in the old man’s rant, it is important to notice the amount of fabric that these young men are wearing, “twelve yerdes wyde, with pendant sleeves down.” The greater

amount of fabric that someone is wearing, the more expensive it costs— “amounting unto twenty pound or bet.” It would take about two years to make twenty pounds or more for any common worker in London; therefore, that leads him to say “hath left him wherewith for to buy an hood.” This means that if any man can purchase this luxurious, material item of clothing, then he should be able to buy a hood, but in this instance, he has no true wealth because he spent all of his money on luxurious clothes.

Woolen cloth was one of the most common fabrics in Medieval London. Wool was the most popular fabric for clothing because wool takes dye very well and it was affordable for most people. Quinton and Oldland note, “English woolen cloth exports rose dramatically from the mid-fourteenth to the beginning of the sixteenth century, as did London’s share of those exports” (112). London merchants competed with other merchants (Hanseatic, Italian, and other alien merchants) in the wool trade, but London’s large benefits from the international cloth trade gave them a much greater capital base than anywhere else in the country. Therefore, London merchants could purchase cloth from all over the country while other merchants were purchasing their cloth from only London. London was the best manufacturer of wool because of its rainy weather— the rain allowed good grass to grow which was the best conditions for grazing sheep.

In the Fourteenth Century, London merchants became much more obsessed with raw wool over cloth. Wool was warm and was able to be produced in bulk, which attracted many Londoners of all social classes. However, one symbol of social status was if a person was wearing multiple layers of wool. Elgin says, “Medieval folk did not have separate wardrobes for summer and winter but simply added a layer or a lining in cold weather” (7). Yes, wool was a very common fabric, but the amount of layers that someone had on was a very easy way to recognize a person's wealth. However, poor peasants were unable to afford to buy wool, instead,

they would grow their own flax plants for linen or hemp to make a rope or coarse cloth so that they could make the clothes themselves. “A lot of country folks used the common land to graze sheep so that they could spin and weave their own woolen cloth” (Elgin 44). The material of a person's clothing in Medieval London made it easier for people to identify another person's wealth and status. Since color is very misleading and many colors are the same throughout the social hierarchy, before the sumptuary laws were revoked, they helped to limit who could buy what materials.

The idea of ‘noble’ versus ‘working’ is very misleading when describing the dress of a servant. Servants were technically a part of the working people, but their dress did not make it look that way because “servants were simply but well dressed in order to reflect the status of the Lord” (Elgin 43). However, it was most likely that the servant did not own that item of clothing, but instead, it was their lord's or sometimes a “fashion gift from their employer” (Elgin 43). Servants in a noble house would often be seen with their lord's badge sewn onto their outfits. This was a clear identifier not only who their lord was, but that they were a servant because no other person would be wearing it. Each servant was also given one outfit per year, based on who their lord was, but the expense was often taken out of their salary because the clothes they were required to wear were so expensive. There were also some cases where the servants were given ‘worn-out’ clothing from their lord as a present. Ultimately, the servants represented the lord, so it was very important for them to dress to impress other wealthy people. Outside of the servant's life, they would dress in wool or linen, but when they were in company with their master, it was more likely to see a servant wearing nice clothes.

The squire, neither a servant or a gentleman, would also be seen dressed nicely in wool and linen; Elgin says, “The Knights squire, neither a household servant nor yet a gentleman in

his own right, was simply but neatly dressed in wool and linen. In company with his master, however, he would be more smartly attired” (43). The material of a servant or squire’s clothes was one of the easiest ways to identify them; although, it could very easily mislead people into thinking that they are a part of the upper class if they are seen in these clothes without their lord around.

Lords had their servants dressed in luxurious clothes not for the benefit of themselves, but to show other people that he had enough money to dress his servants. Therefore, the servant dresses in expensive clothes to please other wealthy people, but when they are not working the servant dresses like any other working person. This idea is parallel to the way that the old man in *The Regiment of Princes* describes how young men dress in the streets when everyone can see them versus what they have at home when no one is around:

"For thogh he gette foorth among the prees	struts; crowd
And overlooke every poore wight,	looks down on
His cofre and eek his purs been penylees;	treasure chest
He hath no more than he gooth in right.	
For land, rente, or catel he may go light;	income; property; walk easily
The weighte of hem shal nat so moche peise	weigh
As dooth his gowne. Is swich array to preise?" (429-434)	to be praised

In the streets, “he gette fourth among the press and overlooke every poor wight” meaning that in front of other people, the young men try to dress and act like they are nobility. When he is in the streets, they look down upon people and strut through the crowd so that every man sees what luxurious clothes he is wearing, and makes the assumption that he is wealthy. However, when he is not around other people in the streets showing off his ‘wealth’ he is ‘penyless’ and has no

more than what is rightfully his. No land, no rent, or cattle. He owned nothing because he refused to wear what the working people were fit to wear which was wool or cotton. These lines could not only be interpreted as criticism but could also be the old man mocking the way that these 'poore' men are living. In his opinion, it is distasteful that they are wearing clothes that they are unable to afford, but it is also embarrassing that they are putting all of their money towards fashion for people to think that they are wealthy. Ultimately, these men are choosing pride over their lives and well-being:

"Pryde hath wel lever bere an hungry mawe

To bedde than lak of array outrage.

He no prys settith by mesures lawe,

Ne takith of him clooth, mete, ne wage;" (498-501)

Working men are choosing to spend their money on wasteful clothing for their pride and benefit rather than a place to sleep or food to eat. The line "To bedde than lak of array outrage" means that pride would rather lack a bed than extravagant clothing. The old man is mocking the fact that these poor men choose to wear nice things over living a comfortable lifestyle. It is unfair to the lords who not only can afford these luxuries but are able to afford clothes and a nice lifestyle.

Overall, wool was the most common material that people of medieval London wore because the most expensive materials such as "silk, cloth of silver, cloth of gold, and furs like ermine and miniver (the hide of a small gray and white squirrel) were reserved for the most privileged members of society, as the sumptuary laws suggest" (Vanhoutte 151). Many of these textiles were named by their major city of production:

Desmask was 'cloth from Damascus' in Syria, muslin came from Mousul in Iraq, and

gauze came from the Palestinian city of Gaza. Taffeta, a crisp, smooth woven silk, comes from the Persian *taftan* (“to shine”). Tabby, a kind of striped taffeta, is named after al-Attabiya, a district of Baghdad. The wonderfully named musterdvillers was a gray cloth, named after a town in Normandy. “Cloth of Tars” was from Tartary. (Elgin 10)

So poore a wight his lord to countrefete	imitate
In his array; in my conceit it stynkith.	opinion
Certes to blame been the lordes grete,	Certainly; great
If that I durste seyn, that hir men lete	dare say; let
Usurpe swich a lordly apparaille;	attire
It is nat worth, my chyld, withouten faille” (435-441)	worthy; for certain

In his opinion, it is wrong for such a poor person to dress like their lord. It is only wrong because they are poor. Therefore he claims that when poor men wear this attire it is considered ‘stynkith’ or distasteful solely because they do not have the money to dress the way that they do, but spend their money on these clothes so that other people think that they are important and wealthy. In a way, the man is not only criticizing but also mocking their way of living. The old man then explains how the lords are also at fault for allowing these poor people to wear the same thing that they do. However, it is also important to understand the word “countrefete.” In London, there were many accounts of fraud, especially money fraud. Therefore, many merchants found a way of cheating their way into the production of clothing. To understand the reason behind the old man’s frustration, one must first recognize how not only money fraud was widespread in Medieval London, but also how the tricks of trade affected people:

“Once cloth production had become big business, rather than a domestic activity, wily merchants found a way of cheating their customers. A character in *Piers Plowman* (c. 1379) reveals the tricks of the trade. Stretching the selvage to make the cloth look longer was a favorite trick, and another was joining strips together and laying them in a press “till ten or eleven yards were stretched into thirteen.” Weavers were no better, paying their wool spinners by weight for each pound of wool they produced, but using a

pound-and-a-quarter weigh in the scales so they got more for their money” (24).

It is interesting to note that although there was money fraud, people still found ways to make materials look longer and more expensive when they were not. Therefore, it can be argued that the idea of fraud completely wipes away the power that fashion has. Every person in London tried to imitate the way the nobles dressed whether it consisted of using ‘look alike’ fabrics or simply wasting all of one’s money on luxurious clothes. Furthermore, the frustration the old man has about fashion also comes from the fact that there is no longer a clear ‘ranking’ in society because every person is mocking the way that their lords dress.

The relationship between clothing and identity in London reveals many things about a person’s social standing. Although clothing is a symbol that communicates information about someone’s role in society, it does not reveal their true lifestyle beyond clothes. Fashion, whether it be on servants, commoners, peasants, or kings allowed other people outside of these groups to make assumptions about their lives. The clothes that Londoners wore said so much about where they belonged in society. Specifically, the color and material that a person was wearing allowed other people to make assumptions about their lives. However, Thomas Hoccleve’s *The Regiment of Princes* highlights that the freedom of fashion became a point of disagreement, especially among the working class. The critique of the fashion of young working men reveals that there is a clear disconnect between the clothes that they are wearing and their actual social standing. He believes that fashion must serve as a transparent indicator of wealth and status not only in public but at home. Ultimately, to understand why the old man is so frustrated it is important to know what fashion was ‘supposed’ to be like: what certain colors and materials stand for, and who is ‘fit’ to wear it. Therefore, by understanding the deeper meaning of the color and material of one’s clothes the reader can sympathize with the old man because what they are doing is unfair

to everyone in society. The frustration of the old man serves as a reminder of how prevalent of a role fashion plays in maintaining social order.

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