

Temporality, spatiality and social order in seventeenth-century Estonian sumptuary legislation.

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Introduction

As the saying goes, “what you see is what you get” and if there ever was a period in history that could use this as its slogan, it would without doubt be the early modern period. Ideally, outer appearances and inner selves were supposed to correspond and the position of the wearer within the social system was supposed to be instantly visible from what they wore. Far from being a private matter solely dependent of the person’s own desires and available means, in a hierarchical society dress was intended to demonstrate the position of the wearer within the social system. It thus became increasingly important to regulate dress carefully by way of issuing sumptuary laws, which enforced the correspondence between signified and signifier, and the argument that sumptuary laws were devised and enforced in order to maintain social order has been a given in research concerning the early modern period.

Therefore, early modern clothing regulations have a lot to say about how social order was perceived by those in power and consequently, how this social order was supposed to be visualised. This brief article, however, will focus on the third and perhaps the least obvious aspect of the clothing regulations, namely what kind of effect time and space had on social order and proper appearances. Rather than supplying a definite answer, it is my aim to open up a previously unexplored theme and provide new ways of thinking about costume, social order and how it worked at a specific point in time and in a specific physical location. The first section will analyse specific time periods and specific occasions when regulation of appearances and social interaction was considered necessary and emphasis will be placed on the public nature of early modern civic celebrations and the consequent manifestation of one’s identity and status that such occasions allowed. The second section will explore different ways of thinking about urban spaces that were deemed problematic and how early modern townspeople related to them. The source material used in this brief overview comes from the clothing regulations issued by Tallinn town council during the seventeenth century.

Time to live and time to die: occasions for regulation

In the same archival collection with clothing and sumptuary regulations one can also find regulations concerning specific events, such as weddings, christenings and funerals.¹ Additionally, other kinds of sources inform us of occasions whose arrangement was subject to regulation, such as the reception of Swedish monarchs, royal representatives or other foreign envoys, but also for example giving the oath of allegiance to the king.² However, no other occasion is taken up in the clothing regulations in such a detailed manner as marriages. The early modern wedding is the best representative of an occasion that involved social interaction but was at the same time infused with significant religious meaning.³ In the wedding, the couple laid claim to their and their respective families' social prestige by displaying wealth – in giving, in dressing and in feasting.⁴ Because of its dual purpose the wedding was a constant concern for the town council, so much so that during the whole early modern period they issued specific regulations concerning weddings, which determined not only the clothing of the happy couple but numerous other aspects, such as the location, the length, number of guests, the physical location and forms of entertainment.⁵ Therefore, the wedding as an occasion was undoubtedly an interaction between the temporal and the spatial. In the present overview it has been placed into the temporal context for analytical purposes.

The 1665 clothing regulation serves as a good example of how dress was regulated. Members of Great Guild and merchant journeymen were allowed to have coats made of silk *Grobgrün*, taffeta and silk *Tercionell* on festive occasions such as weddings, but glossy velvet, unshorn velvet, plush, brocade and satin remained strictly forbidden to them, as did coats lined with plush or other similar silk fabrics (on working days silk was forbidden and they were supposed to wear coats made of woollen fabrics such as *Gewandt* or Turkish *Grobgrün*).⁶ Their wives and daughters

¹ Tallinn City Archives (hereafter TLA), collection 230 *Der Revaler Magistrat*, inventory 1, no. Bs7 *Kleider-, Hochzeits-, Kindtauf-, Begräbnis- u.s.w. Ordnungen 1497-1738*.

² Kodres, Krista, "Magic of Presence: the Ceremony of Taking an Oath of Allegiance in 1690 in Tallinn (Reval)" in K. Kodres and A. Mänd (eds.), *Images and Objects in Ritual Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Northern and Central Europe* (Newcastle, 2013), pp. 183-204.

³ L. Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford, 1989), p. 134.

⁴ L. Roper, "“Going to Church and Street”: Weddings in Reformation Augsburg", *Past and Present* 106 (1985), p. 74.

⁵ The majority of the wedding regulations can be found in the same collection as the clothing regulations, TLA.230.1.Bs7.

⁶ TLA, collection 191 *Revaler Kaufmanns- Oder Grosse Gilde*, inventory 1 no. 19 *Armen-Ordnung, Rewiderte Ordnung des allgemeinen Gottes-Kastens. Kasten-Ordnungen, Kleider-Ordnungen*, p. 87. The Great Guild was the merchant guild of Tallinn that mostly consisted of merchants of German origin. Merchant journeymen were united into Brotherhood of the Blackheads and were usually the unmarried sons of members of the Great Guild. St. Canute's and St. Olaf's Guilds were artisan guilds and men of Estonian origin could at best attempt to join the latter one, as it united lesser artisans. *Grobgrün* - a general term for various kinds of coarse strong-threaded woollen and silk fabrics of lower quality.

could wear coats made of silk, *Grobgrün*, *Tercionell*, velvet, damask or other silk fabrics of similar value (on a daily basis they had to wear coats of woollen *Grobgrün* or *Gewandt*); additionally, they could also wear colourful but not golden or silver ribbons, which had to be of moderate size and not on the head; at all other times the ribbons had to be black and all trimmings, laces and other kinds of decorations remained forbidden.⁷ As their social status was lower, wives and daughters of St. Canute's Guild's members were allowed to wear coats made of cheaper fabrics such as *Lacken* and *Grobgrün* and at the most they could have lapels with *Kaffa* on festive occasions. Additionally, they could wear jackets made of *Kaffa* with a skirt made of taffeta or *Tercionell* for festive occasions (on a daily basis they were supposed to wear jackets made of woollen fabric such as *Lacken*, *Sayen*, woollen or 'Turkish *Grobgrün*'). Accessories were completely forbidden to them.⁸ In the case of wives and daughters of St. Olaf's Guild, it has not been mentioned whether they were allowed any clothes of costlier fabrics on their wedding days.

However, when it comes to regulations of specific colours, it is difficult to make any kind of generalisations based on merely the clothing regulations. According to the 1706 regulation, during the ceremony in the church, the bridegroom had to be dressed in black and the bride had to wear a black dress.⁹ Two possible interpretations can be offered here: either black was considered the appropriate colour for the bridal couple to wear at the wedding ceremony in the church but perhaps more likely, it could also mean that for some reason or other a general mourning period had been proclaimed and this is why black was the obligatory colour even during such a happy occasion as a wedding. Ulinka Rublack has discussed the meaning of colours and concluded that black was often the colour of the upper ranks, symbolising values such as loyalty and constancy.¹⁰ To conclude, more than anything else it was the quality and cost of the fabric rather than the design or colour that appear to have been of most concern to the town council when it came to costume during special occasions.

With all its various aspects such as the ceremony, the procession to the church, the following party, dinner and gift-giving, it emerges that the early modern wedding was undoubtedly a public affair. Even though the number of guests one was allowed to invite was subject to regulation,¹¹ it was a public interaction legitimised through the audience being present and witnessing it.

Tercionell - light one-coloured silk fabric. *Gewandt* - a woollen fabric. For a very good explanatory list of fabrics see L. Eisenbart, *Kleiderordnungen der deutschen Städte zwischen 1350 und 1700: Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte des deutschen Bürgertums* (Göttingen, 1962).

⁷ TLA.191.1.19, p. 90r.

⁸ TLA.191.1.19, p. 91r. *Lacken* – general term for woollen cloth; *Kaffa* - silk material, has also been associated with velvet, *Sayen* - initially a woollen outer garment and then the fabric preferably used for it.

⁹ TLA.230.1.Bs7, p. 411v.

¹⁰ U. Rublack *Dressing Up: Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe* (Oxford, 2010), p. 137, p. 248.

¹¹ TLA.230.1.Bs7, p. 411v.

Discussing the wedding procession, Lyndal Roper has emphasized that “Testimony from the people who had seen the couple’s wedding procession, not a document from the church, was commonly supplied when proof of a marriage’s legitimacy was required.”¹² Thus, the fact that the marriage and its various components were enacted in the public became almost as important as the fact that the ceremony had actually taken place. It had to be legitimised by an audience for it to become true and official.

Finally, in addition to specific occasions certain holiday periods of the year could also be of concern to the town council. Even though such instances are rare, both the 1690 and 1691 regulations clearly stated that they were to be enforced by Easter holidays and all abuses of luxury had to be abolished for good by then.¹³ Since the two regulations are pretty identical and issued roughly at the same time with a year between them it can be seen as an attempt to remind the people and enforce restrictions before a specific holiday period that was infused with religious meaning and symbols. Another unique document from early eighteenth century issued by the town council specified all the annual holidays and celebrations townspeople were supposed to observe. It emerges that the majority of them were tied to a specific religious context, such as the Annunciation and the celebration of the apostles and the evangelists.¹⁴ Neithard Bulst has discussed the role such religious holidays played for the self-representation of people and suggested that wearing a sumptuous costume was perceived to serve as a praise to the lord and not as an accentuation of one’s wealth and status.¹⁵ Thus, people were likely to employ these instances of public interaction with a significantly increased audience and the town council, being aware of it, took action to curb such luxurious displays.

Spaces of social interaction

It has been demonstrated previously that the modern notions of private and public space did not exist at all in early modern culture and thus such a division should not be merely accepted as a given.¹⁶ For example, the early modern street as a physical space was extremely ambiguous, as it joined various private and public spaces to each other but at the same time could never be entirely separated from them. The streets “always entailed negotiation of public and private”.¹⁷ Thus, we should look elsewhere for meaningful ways of discussing physical space, such as Guido

¹² L. Roper, ““Going to Church and Street”: Weddings in Reformation Augsburg”, *Past and Present* 106 (1985), p. 66.

¹³ *Generale Kleiderordnung von 1691*, p. 238, TLA.191.1.19, p. 113v.

¹⁴ TLA.230.1.Bs7, p. 408. The document is quite heavily damaged and not all of it is unfortunately readable.

¹⁵ N. Bulst, “Kleidung als sozialer Konfliktstoff: Probleme kleidergesetzlicher Normierung in sozialer Gefüge”, *Saeculum* 44 (1993), p. 35.

¹⁶ Laitinen, Riina and Thomas Cohen (eds.), *Cultural History of Early Modern European Streets* (Leiden, 2009), p. 4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

Ruggiero, discussing a gathering of a male circle of friends in a private home in Renaissance Florence, instead lays great emphasis on how a space was used, claiming that male use could transform the kitchen from domestic to civic/masculine space. He argues, “The gendered use of space breaks down the modern concept of public versus private space which seems in part to turn around the home and the domestic.”¹⁸ The town hall square, Ruggiero claims, “was for the upper and middling classes of the time at least more masculine and identity giving (in the sense of providing a sense of being a member of a civic community and the groups of that community) than public”.¹⁹ Not only does this add to our understanding of how early modern people perceived urban spaces but Ruggiero also points to other ways of perceiving space, such as through the lens of gender.²⁰

As appears from the clothing regulations issued in Tallinn during the seventeenth century, the church was one of the main spaces for social interaction that people used to display their social position, and the town council’s concern with improper displays echoes continuously throughout the century. Already how one arrived and left the church on Sunday was regulated – the carriages were to have no kind of decorations whatsoever and more than one horse in front of one carriage was considered too luxurious.²¹ According to the 1706 regulation, if a woman was to go to a church wearing a coat with colourful fixings or a *Fontange* with one or more colourful ribbons, one had to pay 20 *daler silvermynt*.²² Additionally, maidservants and women of lower sorts (in German *Weiber*) were not allowed to appear in church with golden and silver real or fake decorations or with expensively lined coats.²³ Arguably, the various limits and restrictions set in the clothing regulations applied to all kinds of public spaces but in all of these instances it is noteworthy that the church as a specific place is highlighted.

According to Susan Vincent, people gathered and observed one another in the church and social agenda was at least as important as the religious one. Additionally, church was an important venue for displaying dress. “Eyes may have been lowered in prayer, but undoubtedly were also cast in sidelong glances of appraisal, as the congregation assessed one another's garments.” The problem with the church, as Vincent has pointed out, was that it was a place of worship and

¹⁸ G. Ruggiero, *Machiavelli in Love: Sex, Self and Society in the Italian Renaissance* (Baltimore, 2007), p. 90.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

²⁰ I have discussed this more at length in my master’s thesis. The guild hall, for example, was an exclusively male space, however, on certain occasions such as a wedding celebration it could be temporarily transferred into a non-gendered space.

²¹ TLA.191.1.19, pp. 92v-93r; *Generale Kleiderordnung von 1691* in *Archiv für die Geschichte Liv-, Est- und Kurlands*, volume 1 (Reval, 1857), p. 239; Estonian Historical Archives, collection 1002 *Viljandi magistrat*, inventory 1 no. 14 *Samelband von Ordnungen der Städte Riga, Pernau, Reval und andere. Teils Drucksachen und Kopien*, p. A4r.

²² *Fontange* - a high decorated headdress, some have understood it to be the combination of headdress and hairstyle.

²³ TLA.230.1.Bs7, p. 411v.

religious observance.²⁴ Being both a public and a religious space with a guaranteed audience, the risk of both transgression and making false claims within the social hierarchy was doubled. Thus, when people indulged in luxury and ostentatious displays of dress, they not only transgressed the law as laid down by the local authority and made claims to a social position they might not have occupied, but they also ignored the so-called laws of God and religion. As is very evident from especially the later clothing regulations, indulging in luxury incurred the wrath of God and sobriety in both dress and manners was what one was supposed to aim for.²⁵

Even though the regulations are by and large concerned with excesses in various spaces we today would label as public, in stark contrast to the church and the street there emerges a curious instance in the 1691 and 1696 regulations, where it is stated that night caps must be without any lace decorations whatsoever.²⁶ One can but wonder why the councillors thought it necessary to regulate such a small and seemingly unimportant item that one would have only worn in the privacy of the home with a potential audience of two or three people. Such concern points to the argument that clothing was not only something external deployed in front of an audience to represent one's social position, but it was indeed part and parcel of one's identity and persona. That meant that not only was it important to maintain a so-called exterior appearance of a moral, rational, God-fearing human being but one was supposed to display these traits all the time, even in the privacy of one's home. God, after all, was omnipresent.

Conclusions

During the early modern period recognisability was one of the central concepts of social order, as a person's position within this order had to be recognisable from their external appearance. Consequently, unrecognisability posed a serious threat to the social order, because if one could not be instantly recognised by their appearance, then how was everybody else supposed to know who that person was, where he placed on the social order and how he/she stood in relation to the others. This brief overview has introduced the concepts of time and space into discussions about costume and early modern social order. It has been argued that regulation was mainly thought to be necessary during various occasions that involved a significant audience, such as weddings or other civic festivities. As one's social position was supposed to be instantly recognisable from the costume one wore, careful regulation of occasions that involved a potential audience was deemed necessary. Discussion of space and its influence on early modern social interaction revealed that the mostly modern labels, public and private, often do not work in the case of early modernity and if we are to discuss social interaction within a space, we should

²⁴ S. Vincent, *Dressing the Elite: Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 2003), p. 93.

²⁵ EAA.1002.1.14, p. A2r, TLA.230.1.Bs7, p. 410r.

²⁶ *Generale Kleiderordnung von 1691*, p. 238.

instead look at issues of use, gender and religion. Above all, the church as a public and a religious space emerges as a central venue for social interaction and the similar potential of audience is arguably why it became subject to regulation.