

Maryam Barshatli: A Comparative Study of Sumptuary Laws on Clothing in Early Modern Central Europe and Tokugawa Japan

Charles University, Faculty of Humanities, Study Programme: Liberal Arts and Humanities, Bachelor Thesis, 62 pp.

the supervisor's report

The choice of topic for the BA thesis was guided by the student's specific interest in the history of fashion and clothing, which enabled Maryam Barshatli to explore a multifaceted and transcultural socio-cultural practice of complex clothing regulations. As a supervisor, I am pleased that we have identified an interdisciplinary and highly resonant topic in the regulation of luxury, the so-called sumptuary laws, which has proved to be an attractive subject that invites transcultural comparisons. It should be mentioned that while the research on sumptuary laws is very advanced in the present-day research in the German- and English-speaking countries, as well as in Southern Europe, it has been rather marginal, neglected and little discussed in the Czech Republic. Maryam Barshatli's thesis thus newly brings it to the fore and shows its potential.

I would like to appreciate that Maryam Barshatli engaged with the most up-to-date research (led by Ulinka Rublack and Giorgio Riello, among others) that has revealed the practice of pre-modern sumptuary regulations to be a much more transcultural, indeed global, phenomenon than scholars have previously realised.

As the supervisor and student, we approached the theme of fashion as a mode of communication – both in the individual sense and in the sense of shared values and communicated socio-cultural hierarchies. The student, Maryam Barshatli, was able to draw on a large body of recent literature, often inspired by the wave of interest in material culture and the history of consumption.

As I like to tell my students and have shared with Maryam, in the pre-modern era it was often clear and expected to be apparent at first sight what social rank a person belonged to (be it a nun, a priest, a peasant, an artisan, an (un)married woman or a noble person). This circumstance clearly shows the importance of material culture readings and interpretations of clothing. Drawing on Professor Boes, Maryam rightly points out that clothing served as social indicators and also as cultural signifiers for a variety of circumstances („from age, marital status and rank to religion, occupation and even bereavement”, p. 23).

Maryam Barshatly aptly points out that the middle classes constituted the social strata whose consumption habits were regulated the most. In the course of her thesis writing Barshatly

has rightly noticed that sumptuary laws targeted women more severely, and thus in a rather asymmetrical way. She emphasises that clothing regulations tended to reinforce societal norms and gender roles. During the defence discussion this point could be further elaborated by Maryam Barshatly as it is one of the highlights of the thesis.

I would like to point out that Maryam Barshatly worked with edited historical records. Although the thesis is anchored primarily in the field of history and requires a solid (and rare) background in pre-modern cultures, it also employs interdisciplinary methodologies. It works with a large number of analytical concepts (such as conspicuous consumption, moral economy, consumer revolution, industrious revolution, etc.).

A certain weakness I see is that the thesis is sometimes rather repetitive, as if the student was afraid to explore more creatively the individual sub-themes, such as the gender aspects, the material culture level (which could have included images), the environmental dimension of the theme etc. This was already evident during the process of writing and it is a pity that the author did not take advantage of the extra time (study extension) to work on it. Similarly, the author relies on many quotations, which in itself would not be a problem, if she had elaborated more on her own authorial text. Thus, Maryam Barshatly seems rather dependent on the academic literature (largely supplied by the dedicated supervisor) and it would have been beneficial if she had been more courageous in expressing and elaborating her own ideas.

As I take into account the usual criteria for BA theses, I can conclude that the submitted diploma thesis meets the required standards and even at times surpasses them. I would like to encourage Maryam to continue her study of sumptuary laws and material culture in the future, to enrol in a Master's degree programme and to further cultivate her academic interests. I believe that her text fulfils the usual requirements and expectations for this type of undergraduate qualification thesis (BA level) and I recommend to evaluate it by the grades A to B (1 - 2), depending on her performance at the thesis defence.

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