

Jewels and Jurisprudence: The Effectiveness of Clothing Laws in Medieval
Society

Research Thesis

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“My young lady, I command you to change that smock for this dress. The fabric is worth more than a hundred silver marks. There is so much I wish to give to you for your honor.

Put this cloak on over the dress. I shall give you more on another occasion.”

–Queen Guinevere in *Erec and Enide* by Chrétien de Troyes (1170).¹

Courtly literature can provide foundational insight into late medieval social interactions and decorum, and a particularly poignant example occurs in the above passage. Although Chretien’s *Erec and Enide* is dated before the promulgation of many sumptuary laws that marked the thirteenth through sixteenth centuries, it demonstrates the influential societal norms that provided the bedrock for future legislation. Clothing was a fundamental classification of identity and class structure before the jurisprudence associated with such ornamentation was enacted. Queen Guinevere is very explicit about the importance of dress in this instance of *Erec and Enide*. At the beginning of the tale, Enide is described as a maiden from a poor family who then marries Erec—a knight from King Arthur’s court.²

During this encounter, the reader remains unaware of the recipient’s identity. Chrétien de Troyes does not name the character as Enide until after she is given clothing

¹ Chretien de Troyes, *The Complete Romances of Chretien de Troyes*, trans. David Staines (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 21.

² Chretien de Troyes, *Complete Romances of Chretien de Troyes*, 21.

by Guinevere; instead, he uses vocabulary such as “maiden” or “young lady.”³ Before being gifted with her grand clothing, Enide’s name was both unimportant to Guinevere and irrelevant to the narrative. This is just one instance that illuminates the link between clothing and late medieval societal identities. In a time where reputation—known also as the Latin word *fama* in this period—was an integral part of social life, clothing was a way of utilizing those differences for identification purposes.

Among the different categories of sumptuary laws, the vast majority were geared towards the prohibition of ostentatious displays of wealth and prosperity in the form of personal wear. Whether it was the use of gold, silk, or buttons, laws were enacted most often to differentiate between classes.⁴ However, laws from various countries delineated these differences with varying degrees of specificity. Illustrating this point is the difference between England and northern Italian city-states; the former concentrated on separating various groups by creating a price ceiling on garments while the latter focused primarily on specific ornamentation and quality of cloth. Each region was culturally distinct which required diverse methods of regulation; however, that is not to say there were no similarities. Governing bodies placed laws on many types of conspicuous consumption, from how many people could attend a banquet to the number of people

³ Monica L. Wright, “The Real Unreal: Chrétien De Troyes’s Fashioning of Erec and Enide,” in *Refashioning Medieval and Early Modern Dress: A Tribute to Robin Netherton*, ed. Gale R. Owen-Crocker and Maren Clegg Hyer (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019), 195.

⁴ Diane Owen Hughes, “Regulating Women’s Fashion,” in *A History of Women in the West*, Volume 2 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 151.

allowed at weddings or funerals.⁵ In some instances, even the type of food allowed at large gatherings came with laws attached.⁶ This thesis will look primarily at the broader category of clothing laws, and the underlying motivations for such invasive policies in order to determine their overall effectiveness.

Currently, there is a preponderance of research oriented towards the effects of sumptuary laws on gender roles and spheres of influence. However, there is no consensus on the motivation for creating these laws in the first place. Some historians, like Diane Owen Hughes, suggest that these laws served to line government coffers through penalties, while many others have suggested that this rigid control came from changes in the economic system.⁷ Mediterranean trade increased drastically during *L'Età della Commune*, or the Era of the Communes, which introduced more capital into the European economy in this period.⁸ Merchants grew increasingly wealthy—some fortunes even

⁵ Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, “Sumptuary Laws in Italy: Financial Resource and Instrument of Rule,” in *The Right to Dress: Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective, C.1200–1800*, ed. Giorgio Riello and Ulinka Rublack (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 168-169.

⁶ Teofilio F. Ruiz, “You Eat What You Are: The Social Meaning of Food in Late Medieval Castile,” in *Boundaries in the Medieval and Wider World: Essays in Honor of Paul Freedman*, ed. Thomas W. Barton, Susan McDonough, *et al.* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishing, 2017), 320-323.

⁷Hughes, “Regulating Women’s Fashion,” 151; Phillipa Jackson, “Parading in Public: Patrician Women and Sumptuary Law in Renaissance Siena,” *Urban History* 37, 3 (2010): 452.

⁸ Monica L. Wright, “Material Marie: The Power of Textiles in the Lais,” *Le Cygne* 3 (2016), 39.

rivaling that of the aristocracy.⁹ This was a source of great anxiety in aristocratic society where money and power were heavily linked.

Many historians regard sumptuary laws overall as a manifestation of anxiety in the ruling class as social dynamics began to shift in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. There appears to be more nuance; however, with specific classes of people across various countries in this period. Knights, women, and prostitutes were expressly targeted in legislation for what they represented to their governments, but also the potential ramifications of their financial and moral influence in the areas they inhabited.

Lavish clothing cost a significant amount of money in late medieval society which was utilized as a method of control by authorities for dangerous social classes. Knights were subjects with both fighting experience and social status; therefore, the possibility for their social mobility was threatening to the aristocracy. Their definitively volatile characteristics, paired with the wealth knights possessed, created extremely violent situations in many cases throughout this period. War and struggles of power required money and knowledge that knights had in spades.¹⁰ Sumptuary laws dealt with this problem by allowing knights to wear more expensive clothing; in northern Italian city-states, knights and their families were often exempt from clothing laws.¹¹ The income

⁹ Wright, "Material Marie: Textiles in the Lais," 39.

¹⁰ Georges Duby, *The Chivalrous Society*, trans. Cynthia Postan (London: University of California Press 1980), 127.

¹¹ Jackson, "Parading in Public: Patrician Women," 457.

with which they purchased clothing was, by default, taken from circulation— which meant there was less money to supply personal armies. Even if knights and their families were able to purchase more sumptuous dress, they were still unable to hold any political office where that type of clothing would have served as a symbol of power. Essentially, by stripping knights of any political control, sumptuous dress was not as powerful of a public identifier while also decreasing the liquidity of their income.¹² This appears to hold true for a variety of contexts across this time period and will be explored further in this text.

While there have been a variety of theories behind the promulgation of sumptuary legislation, general consensus among historians has been that there were underlying anxieties about both moral and religious degradation in society after the Black Death. However, some laws were created to mitigate the growing wealth and power of certain classes in this period. Clothing laws for knights during this time were partially rooted in aristocratic anxieties of their reduced, and sometimes unstable, power. This class had proven themselves to be both contentious and violent to the nobility and common people alike. Their money and influence were a powerful combination and would certainly have left the aristocracy with the sense that they could be deposed by their most armed subjects.¹³ In many instances, sumptuary laws reflect these anxieties with a clever play of social strategy. Clothing laws in regards to knights, if enforced appropriately, would have been a useful tool to denote their specific status, but also a means of controlling their

¹² Muzzarelli, “Sumptuary Laws in Italy: Financial Resource,” 184-185.

¹³ Duby, *Chivalrous Society*, 127.

spending. A knight would have less money to spend on warfare if they were consistently spending their wealth on clothing and other high-status displays of wealth.

Wealthy women and prostitutes during this time were also beholden to a variety of clothing laws, and their treatment was diverse in the legislation of various locations. This, in turn, provides evidence that there were also monetary and societal anxieties behind the motivations for such jurisprudence. In essence, prostitutes needed to identify themselves with specific clothing choices by law in many contexts during the Middle Ages. Laurel Ann Wilson, among other scholars, identify these badges as “dress codes” as opposed to sumptuary laws because of their different connotations.¹⁴ In essence, sumptuary statutes legislated what one could not wear in medieval society. However, dress codes forced a specific group to identify themselves with clothing that was illegal to forego. Prostitutes were separated from other women in these restrictions which points to the ostracization that occurred for people on the margins.

The culture of gender and the structure of the family were important factors in the legislations that guided prostitutes forms of dress. Clothing laws varied between the strict importance of dowries in the Mediterranean world and the more subdued nature of importance associated with women in England. In the Italian context for example, dowries were notoriously expensive, and left many women unable to marry while others had extravagant wealth to spend on clothing.¹⁵ While sumptuary laws rarely affected the

¹⁴ Laurel Ann Wilson, “Common Threads: A Reappraisal of Medieval European Sumptuary Law,” *The Medieval Globe* 2, 2 (2016): 141–65.

¹⁵ Jackson, “Parading in Public: Patrician Women,” 453.

everyday life of most common people, purchasing sumptuous clothing required a vast amount of money.

Merchants and their wives were specific targets in northern Italian city-states, as a result of a boom in commerce in the thirteenth century that provided more income to mercantile members of their city-states.¹⁶ Due to gender norms, sumptuary laws were oriented more towards women's clothing and accessories, rather than those of men.¹⁷ In stark contrast to this, England's laws focused on the income and status of men, but women appear to follow the same monetary amount for their clothing allowances as their husbands.¹⁸ This speaks to both cultural differences and types of anxieties that were held in either location at this time.

While there are differences in both the wording and intention of clothing legislation, there appears to be certain ideals and anxieties that served as the bedrock for the majority of these statutes. The anxieties surrounding money, power, and morality seem to be the bases for this restrictive legislation. At a time when social structure was particularly flexible, the aristocracy were afraid that their power was either fading, or that they would eventually fall from grace. In fact, most sumptuary laws in the Italian context

¹⁶ Hughes, "Regulating Women's Fashion," 139.

¹⁷ James A. Brundage, "Sumptuary Laws and Prostitution in Late Medieval Italy," *Journal of Medieval History* 13, 4 (1987), 347.

¹⁸ Alexander Luders, et al., eds, *Statutes of the Realm*, 11 volumes (London, 1810-28), vol. 1 (1237-1377), 381.

occur after the Black Death in 1348.¹⁹ During the major outbreak of the plague, the population of the entire continent was in flux, causing public *fama* to become increasingly more important. Sumptuary laws were often about money, power, and morality. Whomever possessed these marks of influence, as well as a structural way to maintain them, had significant control.

This thesis seeks to evaluate different clothing laws across Europe in the medieval period through the lens of their effectiveness. Historians appear to be particularly hesitant to articulate the overall success of this legislation; however, very few define clear parameters for “success.” Clothing laws changed drastically across Europe in the late medieval period which illustrates that there were a variety of desired outcomes depending on the situations in which they were promulgated. For the sections regarding knights, wealthy women, and prostitutes the definition of effectiveness will be documented with the surrounding contexts of their implementation. The interaction between money and control is often united regarding many of these laws; the changes arise from which groups were being controlled, and for what purpose. Generally, these laws were not successful in their intended purposes which changed across the contexts and social groups that they sought to control.

The Clothing Legislation and Regulation of Knights

¹⁹ Brundage, “Sumptuary Laws and Prostitution,” 352.

Clothing legislation, or the lack thereof, served different purposes throughout this period, but they were generally not effective in controlling knights. Furthermore, different governing bodies sought to control the consumption of this group to affect the outcomes of war and curb intracity violence. These statutes fell short of their intended results overall for a variety of logistical reasons, despite the best efforts of the governing bodies that promulgated them.

The effectiveness of clothing legislation has been hotly debated amongst historians for a variety of reasons. The benchmark for “successful” clothing laws is specifically hard to classify because laws regarding attire depended largely on the political, social, and economic environment in which the laws were created. Knights were an important, though oftentimes volatile class, and clothing laws of various locations, societies, and political concerns provided vastly different legislation tailored for the specific problem that they were attempting to address at that moment in time. The criteria which will be used to determine the effectiveness of these laws are: the extent to which these laws were adopted elsewhere, common trends among these laws, and, if a society was engaged in a war at the time of promulgation, whether these countries were successful at military combat.

Various types of clothing were legislated in regards to this group, but the variances came through the contexts in which they were enacted. Some of the clothing laws outline very specific forms of spending such as the Angevin-Sicilian laws which were extraordinarily specific. For instance, it is stated:

Item, that no one, except the above-mentioned count and prince, may wear furs which are expensive because of their rarity, namely ermine, gris, vair or miniver, except on hoods, aumusses, or as trim.... We observe that for bannerets saddles are a necessity, so it is conceded that they may have two new saddles for their horses per year.²⁰

While this bit of legislation does not directly mention knights in this case, they were one of the primary groups that this statute meant to control. While some of the legislation did target this class directly, such as the provision for two new saddles for bannerets per year, most were meant to curb wasteful spending of the upper class during the war—of which knights were included. There were few societal groups with enough disposable wealth to purchase exotic furs for their clothing, and many knights possessed the degree of wealth that laws were trying to control.²¹ In essence, only upper-class citizens would have been the targets of such legislation. The law even explicitly states this fact earlier in the document, “some with noble titles exhibit foolish splendor in seeking to show their

²⁰ *“Item quod nullus ex predictis comite ac principe dumtaxat exceptis pellibus sua raritate percaris ut pote arminiis. grisis. variis vel vayroctis vestes infoderet nisi tantum si voluerit capucia. almucias vel ciffardas....Bandereriis tamen quos hiis conspicimus necessario. Indigere duarum sellarum huiusmodi sub eiusdem anni curriculo innovacione concessa.”* Sarah-Grace Heller, “Angevin-Sicilian Sumptuary Statutes of the 1290’s: Fashion in the Thirteenth-Century Mediterranean,” *Medieval Clothing and Textiles* 11 (2015): 83-84.

²¹ Brundage, “Women and Prostitution,” 351.

might.”²² This further implies that knights were implicated in such “foolish” displays of conspicuous consumption in this period of crisis.

Furs of various types, as well as cloths in purple, silver, and gold, were often the focus of clothing legislation across contexts as they were both expensive and demonstrated status. Other areas, such as clothing litigation in England, mention a specific monetary amount that parliament imposed upon certain classes of knights as an expenditure limit. Outlined in a sumptuary statute in 1367, knights having land under £200 were allowed to wear clothing priced up to six marks.²³ Furthermore, in other contexts there were no sumptuary or clothing laws legislating knights’ attire. However, these statutes served a specific purpose in society, and therefore, are worth mentioning.

It was both social anxiety — that reputation was considered more important than victory — and military practicality which warranted the creation of clothing legislation specific to knights. For instance, in the English apparel laws of 1367, parliament categorized knights into different monetary classes. Those who made more than 400 marks per year were allowed to wear anything they wanted, outside of a handful of expensive and rare furs like ermine.²⁴ However, knights who made less than 200 marks were only allowed to wear clothing worth no more than six marks, along with a host of

²² Heller, “Angevin-Sicilian Sumptuary Statutes,” 88.

²³ Negley B. Harte, “Silk and Sumptuary Legislation in England,” in *La Seta in Europa Sec. XII-XX: atti della ‘ventiquattresima settimana di studi,’* ed. Simonetta Cavacioshi (Prato, Italy: La Monnier, 1993), 804.

²⁴ Harte, “Silk and Sumptuary Legislation,” 804-805.

regulations, such as being forbidden to wear gold cloth.²⁵ Elsewhere, such as in Castile, clothing legislation seemed more about social conformity rather than any firm restrictions against sumptuous spending. To illustrate this notion, Castilian knights only needed to abide by the length of their cape and the correct side to knot the material. Otherwise, they were allowed to wear any color and style.²⁶

Because clothing laws targeting knights were a manifestation of anxiety and suspicion, it is important to understand why this class was feared even as they were exulted in society. Knights could be volatile and swayed by destructive passion. The story of Erec and Enide that began this study is just one example of courtly literature prevalent in this time. It is mainly a story surrounding the violent adventures of a knight of the Round Table.

The laws of primogeniture left many younger sons without an inheritance or land to sustain themselves or their future families. The surplus of young men provided a variety of problems in medieval society, one of which was dealing with the class of knights that George Duby refers to as “Youths.” As the name suggests, these were young knights who searched for their own adventures and were considered to be “youths” until they were married.²⁷ Combat training, often in the form of mercenary work, provided “an occupation” for males who did not have any adult responsibilities. Often the

²⁵ *Statutes of the Realm* (1237-1377), vol. 1, 381.

²⁶ Robert I. Burns, ed., *Las Siete Partidas: Volume II*, trans. by Samuel Parsons Scott (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 427.

²⁷ Duby *Chivalrous Society*, 127.

“adventure” that they found was both violent and destructive in nature which caused a significant amount of violent disputes for the local rulers.²⁸ The problematic nature of knights and their adventures can be seen in the literature of this era. Courtly Romance as a literary genre indicated a great deal about the traditions of knighthood in this period, along with how it was thought about in broader culture. These romances often begins with the main character, a knight of high status, searching for greatness through a dangerous quest. Chretien’s *The Knight of the Cart* demonstrates this idea rather nicely. Lancelot, after finding Queen Guinevere in the hands of an enemy king, fights Meleagant, the enemy king’s son, in a duel. This results in Meleagant’s death.²⁹ This example illustrates the violent nature of knights as well as the damage they had the ability to cause.

Nevertheless, many of these stories end with the knight obtaining a lover or wife and returning home from their heroic adventures with glory and fame, at which point they are no longer categorized as youths.³⁰ The themes of these stories were explicit. Violence was a means to obtain fame and glory, and adventures were how one obtained a wife. While these stories are not a direct reflection of real events, they do speak to the broader social ideals that were perpetuated by this literature. Furthermore,

²⁸ Duby, *Chivalrous Society*, 127.

²⁹ Chretien de Troyes, *The Complete Romances of Chretien de Troyes*, 170-256.

³⁰ Duby, *Chivalrous Society*, 112.

the popularity and longevity of this narrative in literature illustrates a culture where violence was accepted, and even encouraged.³¹

At a time when so many sons were left looking for a purpose and a way to support themselves, it is easy to understand why knights were a threat to the aristocracy. Primarily, the knights were a group of young males, most likely from a wealthier background, who sought out dangerous and destructive ventures. From their mercenary activities, this group had the monetary resources to fund their exploits, the members of which were relatively unbound to a specific place.³² Whether through inherited wealth, or familial funding, these knights were threatening to the aristocracy because they possessed the money and power to challenge nobles on both social and economic fronts.³³

The material culture of knights was also firmly rooted in the identity of this group. Knights were generally wealthy and could afford expensive items and lavish attire which was considered an important aspect of knightly reputation. Angevin knights in the late thirteenth century had contact with the Florentines which suggests significant cross cultural interaction.³⁴ This phenomenon facilitated a booming material culture that became just as important as combat skills in the Mediterranean contexts. The way in which one was dressed—for example, fine cloaks in the Castilian context—was

³¹ Duby, *Chivalrous Society*, 87.

³² Duby, *Chivalrous Society*, 127.

³³ Duby, *Chivalrous Society*, 127..

³⁴ David Abulafia. "Southern Italy and the Florentine Economy, 1265-1370," *The Economic History Review* 34, 3 (1981):,379.

supposed to signify one's status, resulting in a remarkable amount of money being spent on clothing.³⁵ Much like clothing laws for other groups, there were no universally set legislation for knights across the continent. In Castile, for instance, specific measurements and outlines for cloaks were agreed upon, while in northern Italian city-states there were no sumptuary laws against knights.³⁶

While clothing laws varied across contexts and time periods, there are underlying similarities that point to the monetary manipulation that legislators hoped to control. In essence, for knights of the realm, sumptuary laws were a way to control the potentially dangerous spending of a wealthy and violent class of people. The intention, and the anticipated outcome, of that control changed depending on the prevailing circumstances. To demonstrate this concept, this thesis will analyze laws pertaining to the regulation of clothing among knights in Sicily, the Northern Italian Republican States, Castile, and England.

While Sicily is now politically considered a part of Italy in contemporary history, that was not always the case. In the thirteenth century, Aragon obtained dominion over the island and thus the sumptuary laws of this period resemble French laws rather than those of Northern Italy. Sarah-Grace Heller of the Ohio State University notes that Angevin-Sicilian statutes of 1290 seek to mitigate the extravagant spending on products

³⁵Burns, ed. *Las Siete Partidas*, 427; Jackson, "Parading in Public: Patrician Women," 456.

³⁶ Burns, ed. *Las Siete Partidas*, 427.

not conducive to the war efforts of that time.³⁷ One portion of the legislation mentions this detail explicitly:

“And thus during the course of these troubled times of war and hardship it is understood to be good and exceedingly beneficial to restrain superfluous and unnecessary expenses through modest limitations because some with noble titles exhibit foolish splendor in seeking to show their might against the hostile impudence that obstinately insults the success of our undertaking. Enemy powers are not repelled by pompous ornament, but rather through the necessary use of arms.”³⁸

The legislation clearly suggests the reason behind the vast majority of the restrictions outlined further in the text. The logic outlined in the statute is relatively sound. In battle, knights were recognized by their banners and sumptuous clothing. In essence, the more a knight spent on their apparel, the more likely that they would have been recognized on the battlefield, both by the enemy and by their own men.³⁹ In one

³⁷ Heller, “Angevin-Sicilian Sumptuary Statutes,” 89.

³⁸ “*Et si toto vite hujus decursu perutilis isto tamen molesto Guerrarum et discriminum tempore dignoscitur perutiliter admodum opportuna ut per modestie limites expensarum inutilium superfluitatibus confrenatis que inanis exhibent glori e titulos virtus strenuitatis que in viro requiritur unita convaleat et hostiles protervias ac conatus qui obstinanter insultant. Non in commensationibus aut pompa ornatus set necessario qui exigitur armorum et falere potentatu repellat.*” Translation by Sarah-Grace Heller of the Ohio State University.

³⁹ Adrian Ailes, “The Knight, Heraldry and Armour: The Role of Recognition and Origins of Heraldry,” in *Medieval Knighthood IV*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill and Ruth Harvey (Rochester: The Boydell Press,

instance, in the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, the Earl of Gloucester was said to have perished because he did not wear his coat of arms into battle.⁴⁰ This phenomenon was common across Europe in this time and underlines the importance of extravagant clothing on the battlefield. Therefore, knights were perhaps more likely to spend money on their apparel than other wealthy classes. When money was spent on extravagant clothing, there was less money in circulation for the purchase of other goods such as weaponry and supplies to maintain an army, thus leading to this piece of legislation.

Angevin knights were well-known for their indulgent sense of fashion in the late thirteenth century. Luxurious fabrics and colors such as gold and purple cloth as well as a variety of rare furs like ermine were coveted by the upper class.⁴¹ Clearly, it had become such a problem that it could have decided the outcome of a war they were facing. Perhaps the law itself presents this message in the clearest light, “Enemy powers are not repelled by pompous ornament, but rather through the necessary use of arms.”⁴² In this particular case, the laws focused heavily on clothing, but also goods such as saddles and bannerets.

The structure of knighthood in the Northern Italian city-states was complex and the extent of this group's power had changed explicitly in the Middle Ages. Magnates were fundamentally knights that had once held political office from the most influential

1992), 3.

⁴⁰ Ailes, “The Knight, Heraldry and Armour,” 3-4.

⁴¹ Heller, “Angevin-Sicilian Sumptuary Statutes,” 85.

⁴² Heller, “Angevin-Sicilian Sumptuary Statutes,” 88.

families in Florence, and other Italian city-states, but who were unable to hold positions of power after the thirteenth century.⁴³ They were always a potential threat to the elites because of their wealth and bellicose nature. However, despite this hazardous group, material culture of knighthood persisted which the aristocracy used to their advantage in clothing legislation.

Before the thirteenth century, knighthood was an essential part of magnate culture, specifically in Florence.⁴⁴ While the landed aristocracy possessed power, it was in decline as they shifted from obtaining legitimacy from solely their familial ties to their knighthood.⁴⁵ As the thirteenth century progressed, the violence of this class increased significantly and their destruction of both religious and secular property became a matter of concern to the *popolo*.⁴⁶ Further compounding this issue was the reliance of these magnates on their standing armies. These armies caused violent political turmoil and factional fighting that left the people unprotected from the wrath of their sovereigns.⁴⁷ However, due to their violent nature, magnates lost the ability to hold any political power in Florence with the Ordinances of Justice in 1293.⁴⁸ Many Northern Italian city-states

⁴³ Carol Lansing, *The Florentine Magnates: Lineage and Faction in a Medieval Commune* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 208-210.

⁴⁴ Lansing, *Florentine Magnates*, 208-210.

⁴⁵ Lansing, *Florentine Magnates*, 16-17.

⁴⁶ Lansing, *Florentine Magnates*, 16-17.

⁴⁷ Lansing, *Florentine Magnates*, 16-17.

⁴⁸ Lansing, *Florentine Magnates*, 16-17.

followed the example of Florence shortly after the ordinances were approved, with the exception of Venice which hadn't seen the extent of intracity factional warfare to the degree of other city-states.⁴⁹

Much like the Angevin-Sicilian sumptuary laws, the Northern Italian statutes were intended to be a way to manage disputes, but in a manner that was antithetical to those on the island of Sicily. While the Sicilian legislation tried to encourage knights spending their wealth in a manner that was conducive to war, the Northern Italians were trying to discourage war preparations, lest families further developed their personal armies. An increase among the ranks in urban armies would have been an alarming prospect for the aristocracy and could have destabilized the legitimacy of the government.

For this reason, northern Italian city-states, such as Florence and Siena, exempted the knights from the scope of sumptuary law. While women were the primary targets of these rules the knights' wives were included in these exemptions. For instance, in the Republic of Siena, there was a woman named Batista Berti. She was the wife of Achille Petrucci, who was the patriarch of an important family. When Frederick III passed through Siena in 1452, Berti greeted him with a public speech in Latin. He was so impressed he offered her anything she desired. Her response was that she wished to be exempt from sumptuary legislation, and her desire was granted.⁵⁰ This story is detailed in

⁴⁹ Lansing, *Florentine Magnates*, 16-17.

⁵⁰ Jackson, "Parading in Public: Patrician Women," 456.

the *Diario Sanese*, in 1599 by an unknown source.⁵¹ While it is possible that this instance could contain inaccuracies because it was written more than a hundred years later, the story of Batista Berti represents the historical phenomenon of sumptuary law exemptions that appeared in the Italian context. This denotes the importance of dress, and the impact of sumptuary law, in the medieval period for a variety of reasons. Berti could have asked for gold or status; however, she requested authorization to wear what her heart desired. Additionally, it is certain that many wealthy families would have envied knights for their implicit exemption. This impunity was envied by all, and it is important to note how esteemed this type of exemption became before moving forward.

Sumptuary laws worked similarly in regards to increasing the amount of money in circulation across contextual lines. Knights in northern Italian city-states had the freedom to indulge in expensive clothing, thus taking their money out of circulation. In practice, if not in principle, this had the effect of decreasing a patriarch's personal funds. Moreover, wealthy knights and their families theoretically would have had less money to create and maintain standing armies. With this legislation in place, the threat of inter-familial and intracity fighting would have decreased because these endeavors would have cost a significant amount of money.

Whether this outcome was intentional remains to be seen; however, it is clear that anxiety and a history of tensions led to the promulgation of this exemption. Furthermore, around two thirds of Northern Italy's laws regarding conspicuous consumption were

⁵¹ Jackson, "Parading in Public: Patrician Women," 456.

promulgated after the Black Death in 1348.⁵² This instance in history drastically reduced the European population and therefore the control that the aristocracy exhibited on their subjects. More social mobility increased monetary influence of the lower classes because they could advocate for better conditions and higher pay.⁵³ In essence, the reduced population helped increase the power of non-aristocratic groups who further threatened the aristocracy with their growing wealth. This is exemplified by the statutes that were promulgated through the medieval period in Venice. Before 1348 only three statutes were implemented in the Republic of Venice, but afterwards there were approximately fifteen before the end of the Middle Ages.⁵⁴ These series of statutes demonstrate the increasing anxieties that were present in the aftermath of Black Death.

Considering that there is evidence of Angevin influence on fashion in the late thirteenth century, it is possible that the Italians were aware of the impact that this legislation would have wrought. The Angevin-Sicilian statutes of 1290 were explicit about their reasoning for their laws in times of war. Due to established cross-cultural interactions, it can be deduced that the Italian laws were enacted for the same, and opposite, purpose of controlling the money supply of a historically volatile group.

The dress of Castilian knights in *Las Siete Partidas* was much less regulated than their Angevin-Sicilian counterparts, but there were some minor statutes that they needed to follow. Stratified laws clearly had their place in Angevin Sicily during their thirteenth

⁵² Brundage, "Women and Prostitution," 352.

⁵³ Sandro Carracci, "Social Mobility and the Middle Ages," *Continuity and Change* 26, 3 (2011), 378.

⁵⁴ Brundage, "Women and Prostitution," 348-349.

century war. However, in Castile during a time of relative peace, laws were much less specific and strategic.⁵⁵ While the exact date of the enactment of *Las Siete Partidas* remains unknown, most historians agree that this set of laws can be placed at around the mid-thirteenth century.⁵⁶ Notably, during this time period, Eleanor of Castile was married to Edward I of England to stop an ongoing war in 1254, which would have been around the time of promulgation for this set of codes.

Regardless of the political complexities of this time period, the dress of Castilian knights in *Las Siete Partidas* was much less regulated than their Angevin-Sicilian counterparts, even though there were minor statutes that knights were ordered to follow. There is only one entry containing specific instructions of the proper clothing for knights in *Las Siete Partidas*, and those instructions are not particularly thorough.⁵⁷ This set of laws is an exhaustive law code that was divided into seven parts. It outlines a myriad of Castilian concerns.⁵⁸ Title XXI, Law XVIII concerns “Knightly Apparel” which contains a single paragraph, whereas other laws in different parts were often subdivided into smaller laws concerning the same general topic.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Burns, ed. *Las Siete Partidas*, 427.

⁵⁶ Jürg Gassman, “The Siete Partidas: A Repository of Medieval Military and Tactical Instruction,” *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* 9, 1 (2021), 1.

⁵⁷ Burns, ed. *Las Siete Partidas*, 427.

⁵⁸ Gassman, “Siete Partidas: Military and Tactical Instruction,” 4-5; *Las Siete Partidas*, 427.

⁵⁹ Burns, ed. *Las Siete Partidas*, 427.

Nestled between laws of “Temperance” and “Manner of Riding,” is a single section about the clothing regulation for knights. There are no specific requirements against the overall price of clothing, but rather focused much more heavily on the cut and style of a cloak. Therefore, it can be concluded that this law was meant to act as a guideline rather than a law with specific forms of punishment. Housed within some of the other laws in *Las Siete Partidas* are forms of penalty that an offender would have to endure; however, no penalty is stated for the breach of this particular clothing requirement. In fact, the majority of the paragraph is devoted to describing a “knightly cloak” which this group was meant to wear.⁶⁰ It reads:

...clothes might be cut in many ways according to the different customs and practices of the country, nevertheless, all were required to make and wear their cloaks in the following manner..., should be cut wide and long, and cover them as far as their feet, and enough cloth should be taken from both sides for a knot to be made above the left shoulder....⁶¹

The above seems to be almost practical in its description of the knight’s cloak, with one of the only rules being the knot on the left shoulder and the other to ensure that the length is not a tripping hazard. Therefore, it appears to be utilized as a way of self-distinction rather than firm laws meant to promote a war effort, or to curtail one. Lastly, and rather amusingly, knights were meant to do the following:

⁶⁰ Burns, ed. *Las Siete Partidas*, 427.

⁶¹ Burns, ed. *Las Siete Partidas*, 427.

... their [Knights] clothes might be cut in many ways according to the different customs and practices of the country, nevertheless...should wear colored cloth so long as they were young...for instance red, yellow, green, or purple...gave them the appearance of cheerfulness...not proper for them to wear black, gray, or any other color which might impart to them an appearance of sadness.”⁶²

Due to the lack of defined punitive measures, and hard limits on specific items or materials, the effectiveness of this clothing law does not appear to be the main concern for this context. The lack of any penalty would indicate that it was more for social instruction rather than any systematic legal, economic, or militaristic purpose. Therefore, it cannot be defined as either functionally sound or flawed. Future researchers might be interested in studying the differences in dress regarding the “different customs” mentioned in the statute.

England in the medieval period also had clothing laws that detailed both the type and cost of the materials used; indicative of elevated status, but also limiting the potential power of those with a vast amount of resources. During King Edward III’s reign of England, perhaps the most well-known sumptuary laws for this location, litigation was enacted for all classes of people, of which knights are merely a single part.⁶³ Enacted in 1363, the exhaustive nature of this legislation is a large portion of why these

⁶² Burns, ed. *Las Siete Partidas*, 427.

⁶³ *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 1, 380.

statutes are so well known; however, for the purpose of this argument the section for the apparel of knights is particularly interesting.⁶⁴

In this legislation, knights were divided into categories based on the value of their property, either landed or rented, which provided a hierarchy while allowing more money into circulation by capping the price of clothing.⁶⁵ For instance, in a 1337 English sumptuary statute, knights holding more than £100 of benefices a year were allowed to wear furs, but if they didn't meet this requirement than they were prohibited from doing so.⁶⁶

As Professor Sarah-Grace Heller argues, conspicuous consumption was a tool of social advancement as long as there was an audience to provide feedback.⁶⁷ Across contexts this phenomenon seems to have increased the demand for forbidden articles of clothing instead of curtailed conspicuous consumption. While not every wealthy family would have purchased extravagant clothing, it appears that many desired to do so even after statutes were put in place to curb their spending. Therefore, in order for knights and other classes to spend their income on more beneficial resources for the English economy, they regulated each section of society based on what they were able to spend. For instance, as outlined in the English *A Statute Concerning Diet and Apparel*, knights with an annual rent or property of 200 marks per year were unable to wear clothing of a

⁶⁴ *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 1, 381.

⁶⁵ *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 1, 381. .

⁶⁶ Harte, "Silk and Sumptuary Legislation in England," 804.

⁶⁷ Heller, "Angevin-Sicilian Sumptuary Statutes," 80-81.

value greater than six marks, while knights with an income of 400 marks per year were able to wear what they pleased, with some relatively minor exceptions.⁶⁸ The legislation reads:

The Knights which have Land or Rent within the value of ii C. shall take and wear Cloth of vi. Marks the whole Cloth, for their Vesture, and of none higher Price: And that they wear not Cloth of Gold, nor [Cloths,] Mantle, nor Gown furred with Miniver nor of Ermins, nor no Apparel broidered of Stone...and that their Wives, Daughters, and Children be of the same Condition ; and that they wear no turning up of Ermins, nor of Letuses, nor no Manner of Apparel of Stone, but only for their Heads.

But that all Knights and Ladies, which have Land or Rent over the Value of iv. C. Mark by Year, to the Sum of M.li. shall wear at their Pleasure, except Ermins and Letuses, and Apparel of Pearls and Stone but only for their heads.⁶⁹

This law certainly indicates that there was a class difference that would be noticed in the style of dress that different ranking knights, and their wives, wore. Not only did this elevate the status of those individuals, but it also limited the amount of disposable income that each class of knight had. Therefore, to curb the influence of this class, it would have been beneficial to allow them to wear more expensive clothing. This

⁶⁸ Harte, "Silk and Sumptuary Legislation in England," 805.

⁶⁹ *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 1, 380.

would also serve as a reminder of the elevated social status to those below landed knights.

The promulgation of this statute in 1363 mirrors some of the laws, or rather lack thereof, in Italian city-states during this time. Essentially, the absence of detailed litigation in England is somewhat similar to the Italian case. The more high-ranking knights spent on apparel, the less they were able to financially maneuver to overthrow the ruling class, and the more their outward appearance showed their superiority.

Interestingly, during the enactment of this law, England was at war with France in the Hundred Years' War.⁷⁰ The war had been waging on for over twenty years by the time the law code was enacted and waged for nearly eighty years after.⁷¹ This litigation was highly stratified and very specific with an emphasis on purchasing English goods, and dividing society based on rank.⁷² For instance, even Yeomen were prohibited from wearing clothing of over fourth shillings, while their wives needed to wear apparel from cloth "made within the realm."⁷³ Further, knights were only a small portion of the population that these laws sought to control. It is worth noting that we are not analyzing the overall intention of these laws, but this specific subsection of the class structure.

⁷⁰ Neil Wiffen, "Supply the Army: The Contribution of Essex to Provisioning the Forces of Edward III, c.1337," *The Local Historian* 50, 3 (2020), 215-216.

⁷¹ Wiffen, "Supply the Army: Forces of Edward III," 215-216.

⁷² *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 1, 380-381.

⁷³ *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 1, 380.

The effectiveness of this statute has been largely considered a failure due to its almost immediate repeal only a single year later.⁷⁴ Sections pertaining to knights in this legislation are no exception. Whatever impact, if any, that this would have had on society was rescinded before any major changes could take place. Due to this, it is clear that this code was unsuccessful as a whole, but also would not have persuaded knights to purchase more or less lavish clothing based on the laws pertaining to them.

As demonstrated, the promulgation of clothing laws surrounding knights varied across contexts and periods, but all sought to curb the power of this elite group in some way. The Angevin-Sicilian sumptuary laws are a particularly potent example of the aristocracy's desire to curb superfluous expenditure on clothing and goods during times of war. The focus on military spending did not seem to have the effect of producing victory that may have been desired. Instead, the resolution was more of a compromise than a definitive victory in the armed conflict that they had been trying to achieve.⁷⁵ It can be argued that the sumptuary law as a form of financial-military tactic was not effective because the island of Sicily was divided amongst the various combatants, instead of an Angevin victory.

The same is true for the Northern Republican Italian States. During this period, despite the lack of laws pertaining to knights, there was still intracity and interfamilial

⁷⁴ Harte, "Silk and Sumptuary Legislation in England," 806.

⁷⁵ J. Lee Schneidman, "Ending the War of the Sicilian Vespers," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, 4 (1969), 344-345.

fighting which persisted throughout this period. If the intention was to stop the strife of personal armies then these laws did not provide the power and structure to completely stop these clashes. However, very few of these statutes, if any, mention sumptuary laws for knights and their wives.

Further research will need to be done in order to prove the extent to which sumptuary laws were enforced on the rest of the population in order to determine the extent of the impact on knights and their families. While the story of Batista Berti is a powerful one, it is far from the societal norm of the time. Very few groups aside from the knights were allowed an exemption to this degree.⁷⁶ The extent to which the enforcement of these laws took place is an important bit of information that scholarship lacks in medieval Italy—but also throughout the whole medieval world. In some cases, there just aren't records of this information. However, in the ledger of Bologna in 1365, there were recordings of approximately ninety fines accrued by the population which amounted to 450 *lire* for government coffers.⁷⁷ While examples of enforcement are relatively rare, this provides evidence that the Northern Italian city-states did at least police these regulations.

Evidence suggests that sumptuary laws were enforced on a semi-regular basis, and so the gap in disposable wealth would have been slightly more even. The families of magnates would have had an elevated status of appearance, but less monetary buying power. However, if these statutes went unenforced then disposable wealth would have reflected that as well, with many wealthy families purchasing more sumptuous clothing.

⁷⁶ Jackson, "Parading in Public: Patrician Women," 456.

⁷⁷ Muzzarelli, "Sumptuary Laws in Italy: Financial Resource," 172.

The English statute of 1363 was significant in the sheer magnitude of what was being regulated; however, the relatively quick repeal of the law indicates that it was not nearly as effective as it was intended to be. In fact, despite the strategic thought and careful planning that no doubt went into the legislation, the following year it was nullified with a simple “ordained that all people shall be as free as they were before said ordinance.”⁷⁸ Furthermore, another sumptuary law was not ordained until almost twenty years later. This is much different than the Italian context which established and overturned clothing laws at an accelerated rate in comparison.

Lastly, *Las Siete Partidas* were less about outlining any specific violations, but rather geared towards social propriety and standards of the time. Due to the wording of the documentation, it appears that there were knights at the Castilian court who were not originally from the country. Lacking a clear definition of traditional sumptuary or livery laws, it cannot be calculated whether or not these laws were a “success” because there wasn’t enough legislation to truly break the law. The only clear regulations were not “to impart an appearance of sadness” on themselves through their color choices, and a basic outline for the appropriate length and structure of their cloaks.⁷⁹

While sumptuary laws regarding the regulation of knights and their families were complex and diverse across time and context, many sought to quell the monetary power of knights as well as show their elevated status in society. The majority of these laws

⁷⁸ Harte, “Silk and Sumptuary Legislation in England,” 806.

⁷⁹ Burns, ed. *Las Siete Partidas*, 427.

failed in their intention to do just that. Some laws were completely overturned almost immediately, while others failed to turn the tide in whatever armed conflict that was happening at the time. Despite these failures, more clothing laws were put into place in the subsequent years in most of the places that promulgated them to begin with. England enacted subsequent acts of apparel in 1463 and 1483, years later.

Women, Prostitution, and Clothing Legislation

The effectiveness of clothing legislation aimed at wealthy women in this period was haphazard at best. There were varying degrees of successful enforcement across different contexts. Women were often targets of clothing legislation in this period with different degrees of specificity. For instance, in the northern Italian city-states, women were the predominant targets of sumptuary laws with very stringent laws regarding anything from the type of cloth to what could be embroidered on their apparel. In fourteenth-century Florence, for example, women needed to register their clothing with local authorities to ensure that they abided by the most recent sumptuary laws of the day.⁸⁰

In Northern Italian Republican States, wealthy women were the main targets of sumptuary litigation and were often policed by their fellow subjects.⁸¹ One salient example is demonstrated by the box placed outside of the office of Sieneese authorities

⁸⁰ Hughes, "Regulating Women's Fashion," 140.

⁸¹ Muzzarelli, "Sumptuary Laws in Italy: Financial Resource," 178.

where residents could denounce any offenders.⁸² In theory, anyone could police sumptuary laws under this honor system, but the arrangement could only work if the resident (or someone he or she knew) was able to write. While residents were not the only people able to patrol these laws, in many areas this strategy was relied upon heavily. In fifteenth-century Siena, for instance, a resident of the city could only be condemned if at least two trustworthy witnesses came forward to attest to the matter.⁸³ Additionally, while many of the Angevin Sicilian codes of 1290 dealt predominantly with upper class knights and men, they also relied on this method as well.⁸⁴ The statute states, “To ensure obedience to these statutes, anyone who accuses someone of transgressing them shall receive a quarter of the fine paid to the court.”⁸⁵ Not only did this require citizens to come forward, but also that they would be willing to testify.

Though it is outside of the scope of this essay, in the early sixteenth century some governments appeared to address this problem. A Siennese law in 1502 changed the law, stating that a denouncer’s name could remain secret, citing that it was hard to find people willing to testify.⁸⁶ This early modern Siennese statute highlights the ineffectiveness of medieval sumptuary laws to uniformly police the wealthy women of this period. If the medieval statutes had been powerful enough to stop conspicuous consumption through

⁸² Jackson, “Parading in Public: Patrician Women,” 457.

⁸³ Jackson, “Parading in Public: Patrician Women,” 458.

⁸⁴ Heller, “Angevin-Sicilian Sumptuary Statutes,” 90.

⁸⁵ Heller, “Angevin-Sicilian Sumptuary Statutes,” 90.

⁸⁶ Jackson, “Parading in Public: Patrician Women,” 458.

witness testimony, then this addendum would not have been made to the existing *modus operandi* of these statutes.

In the English context women were mentioned in regard to their husband's occupation alone. For example, the Apparel Ordinance of 1363 states:

The Merchants, Citizens and Burgesses, Artificers, People of Handy-craft, as well as the people within the city of London as elsewhere, . . . have Goods and Chattels to the Value of v. C. Pounds, and their Wives and Children, may take and wear in the Manner as Gentlemen and Esquires which have land to rent to the Value of C. li. By Year.⁸⁷

This statute mentions men first, and describes women's sumptuary laws in accordance to their husbands' occupation and assets.

While Italian sumptuary laws were much more exhaustive when it comes to women's adornment, this ordinance seems more concerned with specific types of materials rather than particular cuts or clasps. For instance, earlier in this English ordinance, it states that this class of people were unable to wear these certain materials, "they wear no Cloth of Gold, nor Silk, nor Silver . . . [Buttons] nor owche of Gold."⁸⁸

Italian laws often utilized a variety of different legislation to try and quell the infringement of button legislation. A sumptuary law in Orvieto, a city in the region of Umbria, specified type, color, numbers, material, and size of buttons.⁸⁹ This statute was

⁸⁷ *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 1, 381.

⁸⁸ *Statutes of the Realm*, vol. 1, 381.

⁸⁹ Brundage, "Women and Prostitution," 347.

repealed a year later, and another was not re-instituted for over a hundred years after this decision was made.⁹⁰

Professor Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli has researched the enforcement of sumptuary laws in the northern Italian city-states; however, much more research is needed in the area of enforcement to determine the overall effectiveness in the broader context of these statutes.⁹¹ There is very little known evidence of enforcement for these laws outside of Italy in this period; however, this in itself provides some evidence that they were not effective as well. While the absence of known documentation does not necessarily mean that this was ineffective by itself, the fact that this statute was not replaced for over a hundred years is telling. If it had been successful but flawed, English lawmakers would have tried to correct the laws rather than overturn them almost immediately. Therefore, the sumptuary laws for women were unsuccessful at legislating dress in the English context.

Sumptuary laws for wealthy women were not particularly successful in the context in which they appeared because of issues with enforcement. There were a variety of ways to circumvent the legislation. For example, women who were stopped for button violations might change the name of restricted clothing, arguing that they were not actually buttons but rather clasps that appeared on their apparel.⁹² In areas where they were implemented, these laws against women were either regularly amended to keep up

⁹⁰ Harte, "Silk and Sumptuary Legislation in England," 806.

⁹¹ Muzzarelli, "Sumptuary Laws in Italy: Financial Resource," 167-185.

⁹² Hughes, "Regulating Women's Fashion," 153.

with changing fashions and terminology, or completely overturned with little reimplementation.⁹³ This illustrates that these laws were exceedingly difficult to effectively implement in the broader medieval context.

The laws regarding wealthy women and other categories of women, such as prostitutes, were diverse in their intentions and used apparel to designate the status of individual women. Clothing laws and restrictions regarding prostitutes were more effective in their goals, but still did not regulate this class with the vigor that the medieval world would have considered a success. The extent to which women were represented in clothing laws depended on the area and period in which the laws were promulgated, and prostitutes were no exception to this rule.

While many areas required prostitutes to wear specific types of clothing, it was not the same everywhere. For instance, in Siena, prostitutes were only allowed to wear flat shoes, while in England they needed to wear striped clothing.⁹⁴ The laws regarding prostitutes were closely linked with anxieties of the time. Women, as a whole, were considered sexually promiscuous and persuaded men to sin, much like the story of Adam and Eve.⁹⁵ Additionally, prominent religious scholars like Saint Augustine of Hippo

⁹³ Brundage, "Women and Prostitution," 348-349; Harte, "Silk and Sumptuary Legislation," 806.

⁹⁴ Brundage, "Women and Prostitution," 350; Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Women and Prostitution: A Social History* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1987), 124.

⁹⁵ Joan Young Gregg, ed., *Devils, Women, and Jews: Reflections of the other in Medieval Sermon Stories* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 85.

attributed the spread of original sin to sexual intercourse.⁹⁶ As the medieval period progressed the sexual guilt of men was mapped onto women who had very little legal and societal recourse to fight this injustice.⁹⁷ Historian Carol Lansing highlights the connection between women's clothing and civil disorder: "Medieval lawmakers considered women's hems and factional warfare closely linked: a root cause of the lack of order was concupiscence, sensual appetites resistant to rational control."⁹⁸ Prostitutes were a particularly visible part of society that represented both carnal sin and societal degradation that many governing bodies sought to control.

Furthermore, sumptuous dress, beauty, and prostitution were often associated closely with each other. In fact, this connection was also seen in late Antiquity when Emperor Justinian declared that many women became prostitutes for the promise of fashionable clothing and flashy shoes.⁹⁹ This association is mapped onto medieval law in the form of dress codes and sumptuary laws for this group across the medieval period. In fact, even sermon stories recorded by prominent religious figures like Caesarius of Heisterbach link the moral degradation and sin with expensive clothing. These stories were meant to guide laymen and laywomen in their everyday lives by using supposedly

⁹⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods. *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 18 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 22.17.

⁹⁷ Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 86.

⁹⁸ Carol Lansing, "Gender and Civic Authority: Sexual Control in a Medieval Italian Town," *Journal of Social History* 31, no. 1 (1997), 33.

⁹⁹ Brundage, "Women and Prostitution," 344.

true stories as a means of persuasion.¹⁰⁰ One story recounts a wealthy woman who wore a train to church:

“[The] priest named Catus who saw an odd sight on a woman coming from the church. This woman was gaily adorned with scarves, and trailing behind her was a long train upon which danced a multitude of fiends, little black men of India....they were making funny faces and clapping their hands....These fiends held great power over her because of her pride in her attire.¹⁰¹

This sermon story most likely depicts a wealthy woman, not a prostitute, and can shed light on the link between sin and clothing. At the end of the exempla, the woman is seen running home to change clothes, promising to never wear such sumptuous clothing again.¹⁰² The word choice in this literature is particularly telling. The description of the fiends as “little black men of India” is meant to suggest that devils are endangering her soul because of the woman’s pride in her attire.¹⁰³ In essence, medieval listeners were meant to be wary of extravagant spending at the cost of their souls.

As stated earlier, knights were generally legislated under sumptuary laws where certain styles and fabrics were often regulated across income brackets, or fabric materials and accessories. While the Castilian code outlined specific cuts and lengths for cloaks, it

¹⁰⁰ Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 4.

¹⁰¹ Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 110.

¹⁰² Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 111.

¹⁰³ Gregg, *Devils, Women, and Jews*, 60.

did not explicitly state that they were required to wear this type of clothing. However, prostitutes in the medieval period were often forced to wear specific articles of clothing as identifying markers along with restrictions on materials and cuts of cloth.¹⁰⁴

Sumptuary laws and dress codes for prostitutes, much like for other classes, were promulgated to differentiate various classes and people on sight alone. And like clothing legislation for other groups, these statutes were not consistent across contexts and varied even within regions over time. In Northern Italian city-states of the period some prostitutes were beholden to sumptuary laws and dress codes alike while others were exempt from sumptuary laws, but still needed to wear a distinguishing mark of clothing by law. In Ancona for example, sumptuary laws distinctly described:

No public prostitute residing in the public stews of the city of Ancona and notoriously making money with her body shall be understood to be meant or included within the terms of the next preceding statute dealing with women's adornments ... since because of the squalor of their lives [prostitutes] are not bound by the law's restraints.¹⁰⁵

While the statute above was technically promulgated in 1566, well within the Early Modern period, this law points towards the notion that sumptuous clothing was associated with carnal sin. Furthermore, Prostitutes were considered too sinful to abide by the rules of honest women. However, this link between prostitutes and expensive apparel

¹⁰⁴ Brundage, "Women and Prostitution," 348-350.

¹⁰⁵ Brundage, "Women and Prostitution," 352.

dates back to the medieval period.¹⁰⁶ For example, in Ferrara prostitutes were the only women who were exempt from excommunication by the bishop for wearing long trains.¹⁰⁷ Hughes argues that in areas where sumptuary laws were legislated against prostitutes, these edicts were most likely to show their moral failings.¹⁰⁸ As stated earlier, these statutes were meant to control the spending of those with wealth and did not generally pertain to many lower class people. Some prostitutes had significant amounts of monetary capital that they used to dress lavishly.¹⁰⁹ In a time when social reputation was closely linked with opulent adornment, some prostitutes were able to rival the wealth of the aristocracy. Since carnal desire and therefore sumptuous dress were closely associated with the degradation of society, prostitutes were beholden to both sumptuary laws in many locations as well as enforced dress codes.

While sumptuary laws were notoriously difficult to enforce, dress codes would have been much less easy to thwart. Italian city-states in the late medieval period had an incredibly hard time prosecuting legal offenses for sumptuary laws. As Diane Owen Hughes points out, women often created new words for slightly different items which were covered under clothing statutes.¹¹⁰ One woman in Florence was to be detained by an officer for “illegal buttons,” but was unable to charge her when she responded that they

¹⁰⁶ Hughes, “Regulating Women’s Fashion,” 153.

¹⁰⁷ Hughes, “Regulating Women’s Fashion,” 153.

¹⁰⁸ Hughes, “Regulating Women’s Fashion,” 153.

¹⁰⁹ Brundage, “Women and Prostitution,” 352.

¹¹⁰ Hughes, “Regulating Women’s Fashion,” 153.

were not in fact buttons, but couplings.¹¹¹ This was not uncommon throughout Italian city-states in this period which is demonstrated by the sheer number of changes to statutes that occurred in this region.¹¹²

It was much easier to enforce the regulation of dress codes than sumptuary laws. Due to the nature of this type of clothing legislation, there was very little plausible flexibility with which to misinterpret the law. In Venice, prostitutes were required to wear a yellow neckband while in London they were required to wear striped hoods.¹¹³ Essentially, dress codes were far easier to enforce because of the rigid nature of this legislation. Additionally, there are very few records of prostitutes being punished for transgressions against these codes—most likely because the conspicuous nature of their garb attracted customers and was therefore beneficial to them.¹¹⁴

While there are few, if any records, that demonstrate actual instances of punishment among prostitutes, there were declared punitive measures. Queen Joanna of Naples and Provence, who ruled from 1343 to 1382, decreed that prostitutes who refused to wear a red knot on their shoulder when leaving the brothel for any reason were “to be led through the city with drums playing, a red knot hanging at her shoulder so all could

¹¹¹ Hughes, “Regulating Women’s Fashion,” 153.

¹¹² Brundage, “Women and Prostitution,” 348-349.

¹¹³ Brundage, “Women and Prostitution,” 351.; Ruth M. Karras “The Regulation of Brothels in Later Medieval England,” *Signs* 14, 2 (1989), 421.

¹¹⁴ Brundage, “Women and Prostitution,” 351.

recognize her, and be publicly whipped.”¹¹⁵ Fundamentally, the punishment for a breach of dress code was much more humiliating than those of sumptuary laws because dress codes targeted already marginalized groups in society.

The effectiveness of sumptuary laws is questionable in the regions that required them for prostitutes because they were hard to enforce for any sector of the population. Much more research needs to be conducted about the enforcement of sumptuary laws for this group in order to definitively say whether they were more or less effective for prostitutes as opposed to other demographics that needed to follow these rules.

However, dress codes were more successful for regulating prostitutes for a multitude of reasons. They were much more effective at identifying prostitutes than sumptuary laws would have been because of their forced apparel. These codes were meant to warn local men about a prostitute’s profession while trying to deter others from taking up the same activities.¹¹⁶ Saint Augustine, along with other theologians of the period, believed that carnal sin was a part of the human condition after the fall of humankind from the garden of Eden. Additionally, Pope Clement III (1130-1191) ruled that harlots should dress differently from “honest” women which further justified dress codes and provided legitimacy to laws surrounding prostitutes.¹¹⁷ Therefore, prostitution was a regrettable necessity because otherwise both men and women would be corrupted if they had non-procreative sex. However, prostitutes were only tolerated in society if

¹¹⁵ Bullough and Bullough, *Women and Prostitution*, 127.

¹¹⁶ Brundage, “Women and Prostitution,” 344.

¹¹⁷ Brundage, “Women and Prostitution,” 352.

they were accurately marked. A prostitute was already corrupted in the eyes of medieval society and therefore lessened the risk of more people damning their souls with lust.¹¹⁸

Identifying prostitutes with distinctive markers provided lustful men the opportunity to carnally sin in a way that did not taint the rest of the local population. While the medieval church would have doubtlessly wished for men to remain untainted by carnal sin and sodomy, they realized that it was never going to be the case. Therefore, the intention of these dress codes were most likely effective in their intentions. Prostitutes had a steady stream of customers who were able to identify them on sight, and lustful men did not corrupt other Christian women with their desires. This fact made dress codes for prostitutes more successful than sumptuary laws were for knights.

Despite the differing motives and contexts in which clothing laws appear, they were very rarely successful in their goals. Knights in this period had a variety of different laws restricting their apparel. While England set hard limits on the material and overall cost of clothing for this class, the northern Italian city-states did not enact such stringent clothing legislation against this group. In the Angevin-Sicilian statutes, knights also needed to follow specific sumptuary statutes to direct their spending on the war effort, unlike their Castilian counterparts which focused more on social decorum rather than punitive litigation. Regardless of intention, many clothing laws for knights, or lack thereof, were not particularly effective in controlling spending, morality, or intracity factionalism.

¹¹⁸ Karras, "The Regulation of Brothels," 399.

Wealthy women and prostitutes were in very different spheres of society, but both had a variety of clothing laws placed against them. While both prostitutes and wealthy women were beholden to sumptuary laws across various contexts, only prostitutes needed to abide by dress codes. In the Italian context, upper class women were the primary targets of clothing laws while English women were often lumped together with the sumptuary laws against their husbands or fathers. It is difficult to determine the level of enforcement against both groups, and therefore the overall effectiveness of the laws; however, clothing legislation against wealthy women and prostitutes were extremely difficult to impose.

There is much research still that needs to be conducted about the overall functionality of these laws, specifically in the English and Castilian contexts. Despite the logistical issues of enforcement in the medieval period, clothing legislation continued to be promulgated in the Early Modern age. The underlying moral and societal anxieties still plagued European society long after the Middle Ages came to a close, but the desire for sumptuous clothing still remains today.

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