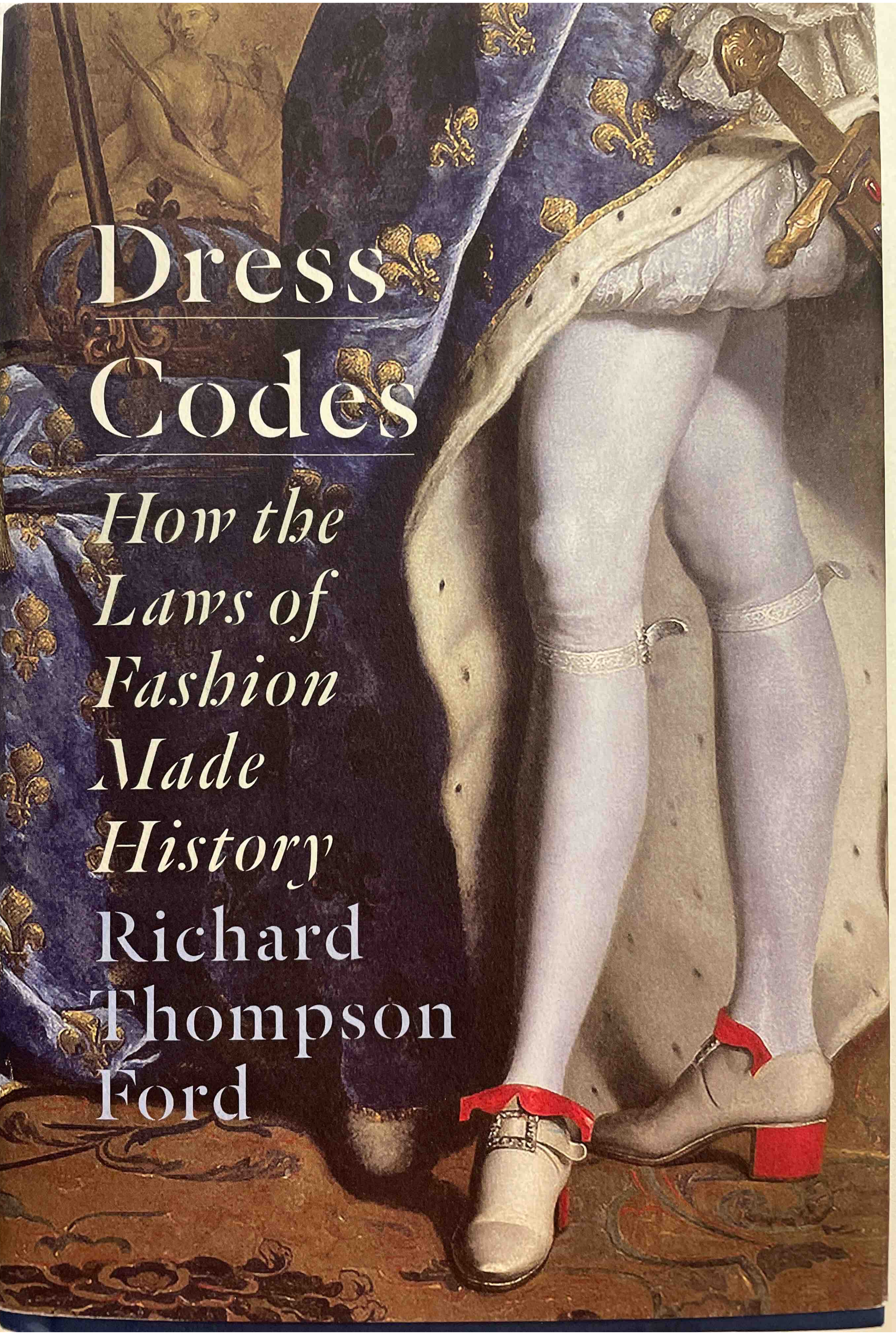

Dress Codes

How the Laws of Fashion Made History

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Chapter Four

Sex Symbols

On the Subject of Plate Armor and Associated Undergarments, Masks, and Costumes

GENDERED CLOTHING SEEMS A NATURAL CONSEQUENCE OF human biology: just as a glove is designed to fit a hand, and a shoe, a foot, so trousers were designed to fit male bodies and gowns suited to the female form. This is a conventional understanding, not so much articulated as implied in the rituals, customs, and moral strictures surrounding our attire. But the sex of attire does not reflect human biology—it is defined by habitual social roles and reflexive practices. Gendered attire has always reflected our expectations, fears, and fantasies surrounding sexuality, reproduction, and family more than anatomical differences between men and women. Ancient dress marked these cultural gender roles in the relatively simple ways draped clothing allowed for. Dress codes after the birth of fashion used a new, more sophisticated and expressive vestimentary vocabulary that dramatically raised the stakes of gendered attire: tailored clothing could more powerfully evoke traditional gender roles but it also created a new sexual symbolism that challenged and subverted them.

How a Teenage Tomboy Became History's First Fashion Victim

In 1429, a seventeen-year-old girl who would soon come to be renowned as Jehanne la Pucelle ("Jeanne, the maiden") left a small town in northeast France to offer her services as a military strategist to Charles VII, the Dauphin—or heir to the throne—whose forces were losing a protracted war against English partisans threatening to displace him. At first, no one took her seriously, but Jehanne's determination overcame initial resistance: her skill and insight helped the French develop new battle plans and her courage inspired the demoralized troops. Under Jehanne's leadership, the French forces successfully thwarted a siege on the city of Orleans. Later she led a campaign to retake the city and cathedral of Reims, where the kings of France had been crowned ever since the Frankish tribes were united under one ruler, allowing the Dauphin to be crowned king in the ancient tradition. Jehanne's remarkable successes seemed divinely ordained, which necessarily implied Charles's divine right to rule France.

In 1430 Jehanne was captured in battle and imprisoned. An ecclesiastical tribunal stacked with English partisans tried her for heresy. But Jehanne's faith was beyond reproach. She showed an astonishing familiarity with the intricacies of scholastic theology, evading every effort to lure her into making a heretical statement. Unable to discredit her faith through her verbal testimony, the tribunal seized on the implicit statements made by Jehanne's attire. In battle, she wore armor, which required linen leggings and a form-fitting tunic fastened together with straps—both traditionally masculine attire—and, like the men she fought alongside, she adopted this martial attire when off the battlefield as well. Citing the biblical proscription in Deuteronomy 22:5 (KJV) which warns, "A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a women's garment, for all who do are an abomination to the Lord your God," the tribunal charged Jehanne with heresy. They burned her at the stake in 1431.

The church retried Jehanne posthumously and reversed her conviction in 1456, citing Saint Thomas Aquinas who allowed an exception to the biblical ban on cross-dressing: "Nevertheless, this [cross-dressing] may at times be done without sin due to some necessity, either for the purpose of concealing oneself from enemies, or due to a lack of other clothing. . . ." Similarly, Saint Hildegard von Bingen had written, "Men and women should not wear each other's clothing *except in necessity.* A man should never put on feminine dress or a woman use male attire . . . unless a man's life or a woman's chastity is in danger. . . ." The new tribunal concluded that Jehanne had worn male garb out of necessity.

Though she never used it in life, Jehanne became known in legend by her father's surname: D'Arc. Jeanne D'Arc—or Joan of Arc—was beatified in 1909 and canonized in 1920. As a consequence of her notoriety, her story has been told and retold, modified to serve numerous agendas. Her original trial concluded that she wore men's clothing for her own perverse gratification, in deliberate defiance of religious law, but the entire proceeding was a political vendetta based on trumped-up charges and falsified evidence. Her posthumous retrial found that a chaste and proper Joan wore men's clothing only out of necessity, but it was undoubtedly influenced by the desire to rehabilitate and embrace a woman who had, in the intervening years, become a religious and national icon. In recent years, some historians have suggested that Joan of Arc was transgender—a plausible hypothesis, but one that may be motivated by a desire to find historical inspirations for present-day social politics.

Did "Jehanne the Maid" wear male attire by choice, in belligerent defiance of religious law; or of necessity to protect her chastity; or as a transgender man? Or did she wear it simply because it looked good on her? Male clothing was certainly more practical under the circumstances; moreover, it was also more interesting and more symbolically potent than the women's wear of the time. Joan was coming of age just as fashionable clothing was beginning to supplement, if not displace, traditional clothing. And it was *men's* fashion, derived from tailored military garments, that was on the cutting edge—as it remained for the next three centuries. Using the sartorial techniques first used to make undergarments for armor, men's styles in the fifteenth century featured form-fitting hose and trousers and short doublets. Menswear emphasized the body while women's attire obscured it in fabric: although, in Joan's era, women's bodices revealed some of the upper body, below the waist, women were draped—a convention that endured until the twentieth century. Because men's form-fitting attire revealed the shape of the body underneath, it was sexier than the draped clothing prescribed for women, suggesting virility and sexual assertiveness. According to historian Anne Hollander:

> Joan [of Arc] looked immodestly erotic in her men's gear. She wasn't disguised as a man, and she didn't just look soldierly and practical. . . . [Instead she was] abandoning the excessively romantic modesty of current women's dress without hiding the fact that she was a woman. . . .

The woman dressed in men's attire was already a familiar—and popular—figure in medieval literature, which featured female knights who competed in jousts and tournaments, girls who passed as boys in order to inherit and protect family estates, and early Christian saints who adopted male garb while on daring quests for spiritual enlightenment. According to historian Valerie Hotchkiss, these stories demonstrated that medieval audiences were intrigued by the blurring of gender categories and sympathetic to women who wore men's clothing to facilitate virtuous endeavors. Joan of Arc's legend fits squarely within this romantic tradition. A heroine in the chivalric tradition, Joan was not only a romantic figure but a sexy one as well **(Insert, Image #3)**. By adopting the masculine innovation of form-fitting attire, Joan emphasized both her spiritual virtue and feminine sexuality—a direct visual rebuttal to the religious morality of her time, which tied a woman's virtue to unassuming modesty.

Cross-dressing was an established practice during Joan's era, but also a controversial one that was tolerated only within well-defined social boundaries. Cross-dressing of various kinds was a regular part of medieval festivals, celebrations, carnivals, theater, and recreational fantasy, always carrying with it a combination of the subversive and the erotic. Some was simply an instance of costume, which could involve crossing traditional boundaries of class and social role as well as sex. Balls and celebrations often featured costumes and masks, which allowed the wearer to escape the expectations of his or her social position and adopt the liberties of another. Some costumes truly concealed the wearer's identity, and many sumptuary laws forbade masks and disguises worn outside such festivities. But most costumes did not and were not intended to actually fool the observer; instead they were designed for lighthearted role-playing and a carefully limited and ritualized transgression of established social roles. For instance, the Renaissance-era Italian writer Baldassare Castiglione advises the aspiring courtier that "even though he be recognized by all . . . disguise carries with it a certain freedom and license." Skillful cross-dressing involved an instructive tension between outward appearance and inner truth; the costume became a commentary on the individual—an indirect form of self-expression.

Historians Judith Bennett and Shannon McSheffrey note that "cross-class dressing, both in brothels and on the stage, was highly charged in erotic terms. . . . [A] prostitute who dressed above her station" was a common fetish in Elizabethan England and had origins "as far back as the late thirteenth century, when London prohibited prostitutes wearing furred hoods 'after the manner of reputable ladies,'" in order to "mitigate the eroticism of over-dressed prostitutes." The attire of upper-class "matrons" or wives was an erotic fetish for working-class men "for whom such fantasies both spoke to anxieties about female domestic power and expressed social aspirations." Meanwhile, the upper classes dressed down and adopted the dress of exotic foreigners and outlaws in erotically charged masquerades. According to one account of such cross-class dressing, in 1509, shortly after his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, Henry VIII and several other noblemen burst into the "[q]uenes Chambre, all appareled in shorte cotes . . . with hodes on their heddes, and . . . bowe and arrows, and a sworde and a bucklar, like out laws, or Rokyn [Robin] Hodes [Hood's] men."

Despite—or perhaps because of—popular sympathy for some forms of cross-dressing, the sumptuary codes of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance prohibited a variety of practices of disguise to make sure clothing corresponded to status and to prevent the sexual titillation and illicit sex associated with cross-dressing of all kinds. For instance, a Florentine law of 1325 banned cross-gender dressing along with games in which young people dressed as old men or in which "anyone transformed himself." A 1481 Brescia law forbade the use of masks to disguise oneself. A 1476 Ferrara statute outlawed the covering of one's face for the express reason that masking made it easier for dishonest women and women dressed as men to misbehave. A 1507 law in the city of Gubbio made it a crime to wear a mask, to wear clothing of the opposite sex, or for laypersons to dress in religious garb.

Gender cross-dressing is probably as old as gendered clothing itself, but it became more conspicuous and more provocative in the 1300s, as fashions for men and women began to diverge. The sexier male attire of the late Middle Ages made female-to-male cross-dressing a provocative erotic costume. Cross-dressing—like sumptuous attire and other "vanities"—was associated with sexual transgression and often cited as evidence of adultery, "concubinage," or prostitution. For instance, in 1395 John Rykener, who dressed as a woman and used the name Eleanor, was arrested for having sex with another man; he testified before the mayor and aldermen of London that he learned from prostitutes how to dress and have sex as a woman and that he had had many sex partners, including "a fair number of priests and nuns." Katherina Hetzeldorfer was drowned in the German town of Speyer in 1477 after it was discovered that she had dressed as a man and had sexual relations with another woman. In the Flemish city of Bruges, Nase de Poorter was accused, in 1502, of cross-dressing in order to live in sin with a priest.

Most reported cases of unlawful cross-dressing involved women accused of prostitution or "ungoverned" sexual practice. In the Italian cities of the late Middle Ages, female prostitutes regularly dressed as men; indeed, according to Bennett and McSheffrey, cross-dressing "so signaled a woman's sexual availability . . . that, when books depicting fashions became common in the later sixteenth century, the typical Venetian courtesan was shown wearing men's breeches beneath her womanly skirts." Similarly, in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century London, "ecclesiastic and civic authorities . . . understood female cross-dressing within the long-established category of women's sexual misrule. More than an offense in itself, cross-dressing was [treated as] a signifier . . . of women's sexual disorder."

This historical record may leave one with the sense that cross-dressing—especially of the female-to-male variety—was predominantly a fetish, used by prostitutes, "loose" women, and indulgent libertines to arouse and satisfy sexual appetites. But this is undoubtedly a consequence of the available sources: other than in fiction, most accounts of cross-dressing in this period appear in the context of legal prosecutions. No doubt many cross-dressers who were not accused of other unlawful activity did not appear in such documents and their stories are lost to history. Moreover, even the cross-dressers prosecuted for criminal offenses may not have committed them: the association of cross-dressing with sexual transgression was sufficiently powerful that cross-dressing itself could have served as evidence—if not proof—of other offenses. To add to the confusion, officials were not always careful to distinguish sexual offenses: homosexual sex, prostitution, and "ungoverned" sex by women were sometimes lumped together. In all likelihood, the only crime some people arrested for "whoring" actually committed was fornication: sex outside of marriage. Finally, and especially in the cases of women dressed as men, there were also practical, non-erotic reasons for cross-dressing: women were excluded from many types of employment, denied access to public entertainments, and always at risk of predation. For independent women, cross-dressing offered many advantages. Undoubtedly, some cross-dressers were "transgender" in today's sense of the term: people who deeply identified with the gender in which they dressed and derived psychological comfort and a sense of completeness from their attire. But it's not clear that we can fully understand the cross-dressers of the past through the lens of today's cultural politics. The meaning of gendered attire and the dress codes that enforced it has varied throughout the centuries and so has the significance of transgressing those strictures.

Ultimately, cross-dressing was one of the many ways of using the emerging vocabulary of fashion to create a distinctive individual visual persona. Clothing expresses personality only by taking the intelligible symbols of social status and combining them in distinctive ways to suggest something beyond status: a unique individual. As fashion became widespread, such playful and subversive use of clothing became more common—and more threatening. The medieval- and Renaissance-era prohibitions of cross-dressing—like the other dress codes of that time—were designed to reinforce traditional vestimentary meanings. These dress codes ensured that, for instance, a gown signified a female body while the pants worn beneath plate armor signified a male body.

Joan of Arc was among the individuals who violated the codes that made dress signify sex and disrupted the sartorial symbolism that distinguished virtuous and sinful bodies. She drew on conventional meanings of attire in an unconventional way, crafting a distinctive, modern persona that captivated her contemporaries and still fascinates us today. In doing so, she became one of history's first fashion victims.

In the late Middle Ages, the birth of fashion reflected and inspired dramatic changes in the nature of status, sex, power, and personality. Where ancient draped attire could express social status through adornment and luxurious fabric, the innovations of tailoring allowed clothing to have much more numerous and subtle effects. The evocative power of fashion was especially important in an era where literacy was uncommon and visual spectacle was the most important form of propaganda: both church and state communicated through images, icons, and grand displays of pageantry. Fashion made clothing one of the most important media of visual expression: because it transformed the body itself, clothing had a unique capacity to shape social relations. But unlike architecture, sculpture, music, and painting, fashion was immutably personal and unavoidably mobile—it made a statement about the individual who wore it and it moved with that individual. These qualities made fashion extremely seductive and especially difficult to control. The dress codes of the late Middle Ages sought to do just that, in order to create and safeguard *status symbols*, ensuring that clothing would symbolize social rank and position—class, religion, occupation, and, most of all, sex—to serve the interests of political power in both church and state. But fashion undermined these ancient social roles just as readily as it reinforced them because it secretly served a different master: individual personality. This would help to usher in a new era and new status symbols, formed from a new sartorial vocabulary—one that communicated in elegant whispers rather than in ostentatious shouts.