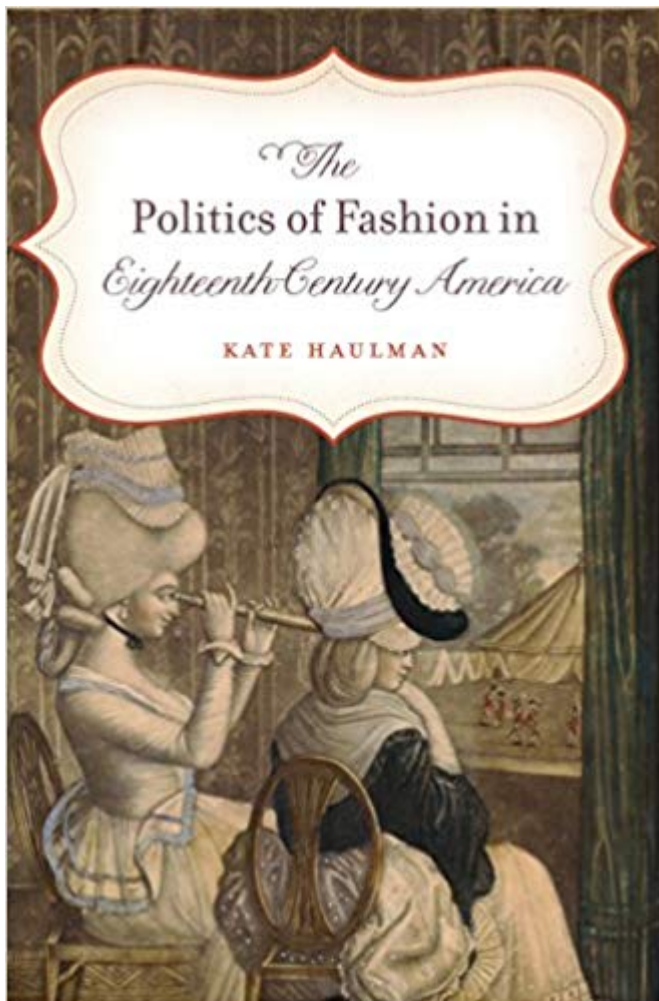
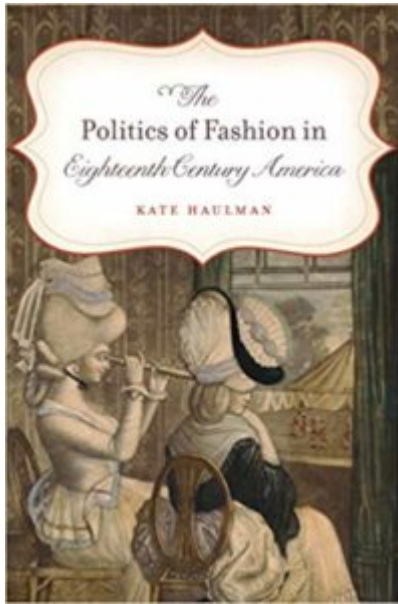


Frenchified Fashions and Republican Simplicity



Clothing studies are too often overlooked by historians and even material culture scholars. Kate Haulman makes an overdue and important contribution with *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America*. While much of what Haulman writes is known among scholars of American costume history, she is the first to pull together a deep and diverse group of resources to present an academic interpretation of American fashion and its political and social meaning in the late colonial and Revolutionary eras.



Using the “four major port cities of British North America: Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston” (3), Haulman analyzes fashion’s embodiment of eighteenth-century cultural and political tensions, focusing on its role in the argument for Revolution. The first of the book’s three sections examines social and economic status and gender relations—and the permeable parameters thereof—as reflected in fashion. The wearing of wigs by men (leading to complaints of an overly feminine appearance) and hoops by women (prompting accusations of indecency) became the particular focus of conflicts about gender roles.

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Chapters 3 and 4, comprising Part Two, discuss the tensions of the 1760s and 1770s over an influx and then taxation of imported goods (including fashions), which led to urgent calls for frugality and home manufacture. Foreign fashions became increasingly unnatural and outrageous, with the effeminate “Macaroni”—wearing tiny hats perched on huge wigs, über-stylish coats, and “mouche” patches on their faces—offering particular targets of ridicule. Similarly, women who invested in a “high roll” hairdo or wig risked the scorn of patriots coming down on their heads. A woman’s commitment to domesticity (preferably including spinning and weaving) and her rejection of frivolous foreign fashion verified her femininity. The general adoption of foreign fashions led to a backlash of “...restrained propriety as the true signifier of high status” (96); in the same manner, political power required sartorial restraint.

Part Three explores the infusion of fashion in Revolutionary politics, when a display of homespun or other simple garb signaled American patriotism—as a flag pin does today on the lapel of a politician. Once the Revolution was over, “...some argued that political transformation should signal a change in culture,

and that an independency of dress was a place to start" (181). To appear legitimate to foreign powers, however, Americans had to maintain a fashionable appearance according to Western European prescriptions. Resistance to the calls for a national costume and continued dependence on foreign fashions led to prophecies of economic ruin and the republic's collapse. Thus, Americans in the early republic walked a tightrope, trying to balance legitimacy as a new nation with the development of a unique culture. Fashion embodied this effort, as well as Americans' pursuit of international trade and domestic manufacture, and concerns about social and gender identification.

Haulman is skilled at drawing together a diverse range of letters, newspaper advertisements, and various other period papers, but her book would have been strengthened by a deeper understanding of the material culture which forms the core of her subject. She states in an early endnote that "I approach fashion first as a discursive practice, which illuminates material culture as a site of power struggles and contested meanings" (227). The focus on documentary study to the relative exclusion of object study results in some unfortunate errors, however. Within the first three chapters, Haulman presents period portraits to illustrate the era's costume and discuss its social implications. Several of the portraits are, in fact, fantasy dress, including the portrait of *Daniel Parke II* by John Closterman, 1706 (66); the female garb depicted in *Isaac Winslow and His Family* by Joseph Blackburn, 1755 (99); and the portrait of *Rebecca Boylston* by John Singleton Copley, 1767 (103). The artistic convention of portraying a sitter in fantasy dress began in the seventeenth century and continued throughout the eighteenth century; it was seen as creating an appearance of timelessness. Haulman misunderstands that artistic convention in her interpretation of two portraits of Isaac Winslow. In both paintings, Winslow wears the same coat—paired with an embroidered waistcoat in the 1748 image, and as part of a suit of matching fabric in the 1755 family portrait. Haulman points to the suit of Isaac Winslow in the 1755 family portrait as "...in keeping with the fashion of the day, but the use of the coat from the earlier work helps to give the figure the desired timeless quality" (99). In reality, the fashionable cut of the coat clearly indicated to his contemporaries that the portrait was painted in the mid-eighteenth century; within two decades, the coat was decidedly out of fashion. In contrast, Haulman describes the dress of "Lucy Jr." as being "somewhat unusual, with its gathered sleeves" (100). But it is not a real dress at all; nor is her mother's dress, with its bell-shaped sleeves—the women's dresses, not Isaac Winslow's coat, are intended to be "timeless."

Haulman also misunderstands some of the conventions of language describing costume in the eighteenth century. For example, she relates the purchase in England of "a rich dress" for a young woman about to be married in 1754: "Given the prized nature of London goods, we can imagine her delight; but what if the dress was simply 'wrong,' whatever the reason?" (71) It was typical in prior centuries to describe a purchase as if it were a finished garment, rather than the cloth for it—thus, the purchase in London of the "wedding dress" was actually fabric yardage and probably trimmings. Women's high-end clothing was

not available ready-made in the eighteenth century; gowns were constructed by the “pin-to-form” method, requiring a woman to be present as the mantua-maker draped and pinned the gown fabric to fit the wearer closely over her corset.

Haulman ends her book with the apt observation, “Fashion was citizenship’s corset: a hidden but foundational device that underpinned the figurative garb of democracy and equality” (225). But she again misunderstands period clothing terminology and reveals her lack of experience in object study when she declares that women did not wear corsets until the end of the eighteenth century: “In the 1790s, the corset reentered the world of fashion. This is not to say that the midsections of women’s bodies had gone unsupported in the decades, even centuries, before. Stays, or ‘jumps,’ and stomachers stiffened by whalebone shaped the forms of many women in the early modern period” (217). Corsets were called “stays” in the eighteenth century. “Stays” were heavily boned undergarments that forced a woman’s torso into the fashionable and very rigid conical shape of the eighteenth century. “Stays” and “jumps” were not the same thing, as Haulman indicates. Jumps were unboned work garments, generally worn under a jacket or short gown, and stomachers were merely decorative panels intended to fill the front of the dress bodice. Haulman does not discuss the significance of the busk—a wooden or baleen slat that was slipped behind the center front of the stays, preventing a woman from bending at the waist and forcing her to sit and stand in an erect posture. The busk, stays, and cut of the dress (or the cut of a man’s coat) all forced a certain posture and bearing, declaring the wearer’s actual (or desired) social and economic status.

Such mistakes and omissions detract from Haulman’s otherwise impressive achievement. But she has certainly, in this far-reaching book, helped to legitimize costume history as a meaningful avenue for academic study and set a course for other historians to follow. Studies of fashion in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries bring forth many of the same concerns that Haulman considers—including complaints of feminine men and of the lower classes dressing above their station, denunciations of excessive attention to and overspending on fashion, dismay over the importation and mimicking of foreign fashions, and desires to adopt a simpler “American” style of dress. One hopes that her research will spur historians and costume experts to collaborate in investigations of these issues in other periods, so that we might finally have a comprehensive and substantive understanding of American costume and its political, social, and gendered meanings.

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