CHAPTER THREE

THE IMAGE OF THE ENGLISHMAN

The Politics of Appearance

The study of appearances, a favoured subject of gender and cultural historians, has often got short-shrift in the history of ideas, and yet, unfairly so, if we consider that the dominant or desirable aesthetic of an era or a people reveals values, distinctions and attitudes with great immediacy and vividness. It is much more apposite to see how material and intellectual culture feed off each other than regard them as discrete entities. Thanks to work being done by cultural and gender historians, we are now closer to understanding how identities of various kinds were materialised through clothes.\(^1\) Why are the image-makers and image-breakers so crucial to our story about identity formation? Appearances, one could say, came to matter in new ways in the Renaissance and post-Renaissance world. This was, in part, because of the discovery of ‘things’,\(^2\) of the increasing scale of consumption and the trickle-down effect of courts on the socio-cultural habits of wider publics. This was, in the words of William Cornwallis, an ‘Age […] of Taylors’.\(^3\) Clothes were the ‘body of the body’ as Erasmus had put it and as such became a focus for much energetic comment and contestation, as contemporaries assessed their relationship with virtue, social hierarchies, classical and religious values, gender and national identity. The subject of fashion in late sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England was no exception to this wider phenomenon, and to judge from both governmental and non-governmental sources, it was the foreignness of both textiles and clothing styles that helped to make it so. The sumptuary legislation charts the social and economic problems associated with the influx of such luxuries: it was felt, for example, that they would destroy the delicate balance of trade and disrupt God-given hierarchies. All these subjects have been well-covered in the literature.\(^4\) The concern here is rather with the thought of those who saw it as impinging upon a sense of national self.

\(^1\) See, for example, Jones and Stallybrass 2000, Kuchta 2002, Vincent 2003, Rublack 2010.
\(^2\) Rublack 2010, xx.
\(^3\) Cornwallis (1600–1), sig. L8r.
\(^4\) For a general account of sumptuary laws see Baldwin 1926; on the Tudor period in particular see Hooper 1915, pp. 433–449; see also Coleman and John 1976, pp. 137–139.
To understand just why appearances became a matter of such moment, it is necessary to engage with the great paradox surrounding early-modern attitudes to fashions more generally. At one level, there is a common propensity to play up the superficiality of the sartorial in all its frivolous exteriority and caprice, suggesting thereby that it was a matter of little weight: quite fittingly, it was at this time that the word ‘fashion’ acquired the connotation of constant change. Yet, if the matter were as superficial as this implied, it is surely logical to ask why there was such overt anxiety about it and why it was deemed so important to repeat ad nauseam that it was unimportant. One could argue, of course, that it simply made for good satire (and austere didacticism), which is true as far as it goes. The overdressed are types that everybody loves to hate. Nevertheless, there is a more profound reason. In many of the texts there is evidence not merely of disgust or a desire to poke fun, or even the poor man’s habitual envy of what is not his, but of fear: a palpable fear that seems due to a belief that these fashions could actually work deep personal and societal transformations. There is a sense, in short, in which clothes are thought to ‘make’ the man or indeed unmake him. Ann Jones and Peter Stallybrass have a point then in saying that fashion was, for the early moderns, an apparent ‘superfluity’ that had the ‘power to constitute an essence’, which had, in short, a disproportionate capacity to establish identity in a highly visible and public way. Ulinka Rublack is along the same lines in thinking that clothing was regarded not just as an external but as something which moulded a person and materialised his/her identity. This constitutive power of fashion is reflected in the very etymology of the word: factio in Latin means the action or process of making. But the converse was also true, because it was felt that fashion had the capacity not only to establish identities, but also to destabilise them. This fundamentally explains why contemporaries fretted so much about the threat continental fashions posed to what was native and natural.

A Golden Age of Native Dress

As with speech, the construction of Englishness present is very much reliant on a particular version of Englishness past. One of the points constantly made in favour of plain dressing is that it is truly historic. The

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5 *OED* sub fashion 10, 11.
6 Jones and Stallybrass 2000, p. 3; Rublack 2010, p. 138.