

Sumptuary Law and Social Relations in Renaissance Italy

DIANE OWEN HUGHES

History has proved that all sumptuary laws have been everywhere, after a brief time, abolished, evaded or ignored. Vanity will always invent more ways of distinguishing itself than the laws are able to forbid.

Voltaire's dismissal, written when sumptuary laws were on the wane in his own country, prompts the question, why, then, were they enacted? We do not have to wait until the eighteenth century to find reference to their futility. The concept of legislating against consumption was ridiculed almost from its inception, often by those who favoured controlling it. Franco Sacchetti, writing in Florence during the first century of its legislative activity against consumption, went further even than Voltaire to suggest that the law itself promoted what it sought to control. As the defeated enforcement officer in one of his *Trecentonovelle* [Three Hundred Tales] explains to his superiors, legal insistence on restraint bred linguistic and stylistic invention:

My lords, all the days of my life have I studied to learn the rules of the law, and now, when I did believe myself to know somewhat, I find that I know nothing. For when, obeying the orders that you gave me, I went out to seek the forbidden ornaments of your women, they met me with arguments the like of which are not to be found in any book of laws; and some of these I will repeat to you. There comes a woman with the peak of her hood fringed out and twisted round her head. My notary says, "Tell me your name, for you have a peak with fringes." The good woman takes this peak, which is fastened round her head with a pin, and, holding it in her hand, she declares that it is a wreath. Then going further, he finds one wearing many buttons in front of her dress, and he says to her, "You are not allowed to wear these buttons." But she answers, "Yes, Messer, but I may, for these are not buttons but studs, and if you do not believe me, look, they have no loops, and moreover there are no buttonholes." Then the notary goes to another who is wearing ermine and says, "Now what can she say to this? You are wearing ermine." And he prepares to write down her name. But the woman answers, "Do not write me down, for this is not ermine, it is the fur of a suckling." Says the notary, "What is this suckling?" and the woman replies, "It is an animal."

The laws themselves tried to respond to this inventiveness of language and style: by the fifteenth century, the outlawing of expensive buttons involved the listing of *bottoni*, *maspili*, and *pianetti*; of headaddresses, *berretti*, *cuffie*, *balzi*, *cappucci* and *selli*; of head ornaments, *cerchielli*, *ghirlande*, *corone*, *fruscoli*, *guarzeroni*, *frenelli* and *vespaii*. When the Venetian Senate in 1443 forbade women to wear dresses cut from cloth of

"Sumptuary Law and Social Relations in Renaissance Italy," by Diane Owen Hughes in John Bossy, ed. *Disputes and Settlements*. Reprinted by permission of Diane Owen Hughes.

gold or silver, they and their tailors began to use it to line sleeves, which were slashed or lengthened to let it show....

If legislators recognized a certain defeat in their innumerable preambles lamenting that their statutes were not observed, their usual solution was not to abandon but to increase their legislative activity....

Most cities turned their sporadic medieval legislation into formal Renaissance codes, which were endlessly amended in response to criticism and fashion. It has been calculated that the Italian cities produced eighty-three substantial sumptuary laws in the fifteenth century and more than double that number in each of the following two centuries....

What provoked such legislative zeal?...

Historians have tended, with Voltaire, to mock sumptuary legislation and, by implication, its legislators. At the best their impulses are labelled paternalistic, a term for which it is hard to find a definition without pejorative overtones. This label does not do justice to the fanaticism of legislating zeal within Italian Renaissance cities, nor does it explain the developmental aspects of the legislation. Finally, it obscures the fundamental question of why some societies—but not others—develop a passion to legislate against consumption. These questions lie at the centre of this [essay].

I

... The aristocratic governments of other developing medieval cities do not seem to have issued sumptuary laws. They first appear, in the middle of the thirteenth century, in communes which had admitted the "popolo [non-nobles]" in at least a partial way into the government....

The limitation of numbers at weddings and funerals, if a form of sumptuary control, also served as a control on noble gatherings and a means, as Heers has suggested, of weakening the power of those noble "clans" that had dominated the cities' early political life. In Bologna, for example, a proclamation of 1276, repeated in the statutes of 1289, deprived mourning of its focus for manifestations of family power. Weeping at or striking the doors of the dead was forbidden, bells might be rung only at the place and time of burial, and a death might not be announced through the city. Those in attendance were limited to ten men and eight priests and the mourners at home, to male relatives within the fifth degree and women within the third. If torches were forbidden, candles limited, and shrouds regulated, the proclamation as a whole seems less dedicated to sumptuary than social control. Early clothing regulations also have an anti-aristocratic flavour. Siena's early reduction of trains on women's dresses, if it saved cloth, also censored an aristocratic style, one which by a later law of 1277 was completely forbidden to servants; and the outlawing of golden, jewel-bedecked crowns had similar overtones....

The sumptuary law, seen in this way as a curb on aristocratic display, becomes a symbol of republican virtue. Savonarola's reformed city comes to mind as perhaps the most fervent mating of sumptuary controls with republicanism; and the memory outlived a generation of Medici rule: one of the first acts of the re-established

Florentine Republic in 1527 was the publication of a new sumptuary law. Despots also sought to control consumption, of course, but with less enthusiasm. One of the least active cities in legislating against extravagance was Milan, whose first sumptuary code seems to have been that issued by Gian Galeazzo in 1396 after his assumption of the title of duke of Milan. The law was re-issued virtually untouched in its 1480 edition. . . .

The earliest sumptuary laws offered no economic explanations. When, in the last half of the fourteenth century, the custom of preambles [formal introductions to the legislation] began, we find some differences of approach between the maritime trading cities and the more artisanal cities of the interior. Both Venice and Genoa emphasized investment: "our state has become less strong because money that should navigate and multiply . . . lies dead, converted into vanities," said a Venetian law of 1360; "a great quantity of money which is kept dead and wrapped up in clothing and jewels, converted into trade might bring great returns and profits," began the Genoese law of 1449. The cities of the interior expressed the need for restraint in almost exclusively moral terms. The Bolognese laws of 1398 and 1401 were issued so "that the state might be strengthened by good and honest customs and those pleasing to God." That of Siena in 1412 indicated a clearer sense that "it is necessary to provide for a restraint of superfluous outlays from the purses of citizens, the rich as well as the poor, for the conservation and utility and honour of the Commune," but later preambles became even more general and moralistic. The Pistoia legislation of 1558 also referred to the ruin of citizens, which led to urban decline, but the legislators were thinking in the personal and often strictly demographic terms that became common throughout Renaissance Italy.

Economic protectionism can be detected in some laws from about the middle of the fifteenth century. The government of Siena began to back a local silk industry in 1438, and by 1440 the commune had decided to fine and brand anyone who removed a silkworker from the city. While in its total banning of silk garments (except for one pair of sleeves) in 1433, the *Consiglio Generale* [General Council] seems not to have considered the effects on Siena's *setaiuoli* [silk manufacturers], who were necessarily doing business with silk acquired elsewhere, its legislation of 1460 was protective of the new and still fragile industry. It allowed Siennese women a few silken garments as long as they had been made from cloth manufactured in the city. Milan began in the seventeenth century, after its prosperous silk industry had dramatically declined, to issue protectionist legislation. Protectionist attempts are, however, both late and sporadic. They should not encourage us to believe that protectionism was generally an object or provocation of the law.

Nor do the sumptuary laws show a developed economic interest in bullion. Gold and silver, along with pearls and certain furs, form a privileged list of restricted items throughout the whole period of sumptuary control. The Siennese legislation of 1277-82 had allowed to women only one unadorned garland of silver for their heads, which was to weigh no more than two ounces. In Bologna in 1289 circlets for the head made of silver and gold were outlawed, as was almost every other ornament made of the precious metals. The fourteenth- and fifteenth-century allowance in many Italian cities of three gold rings became, like the single strand of pearls, a cliché of both law and contemporary portraiture. The restrictions were real, and the

finer could be steep—in Siena £100 (or about one-half the average dowry of the period) for exceeding the two-ounce limit. But the level of concern seems to have borne no relation to the shifting price or availability of precious metals. . . . In Genoa, where the fluctuations in the gold market were probably better understood than elsewhere, a law of 1449 allowing women up to £1,000 of gold and silver jewellery—far more than Siena and many other inland cities permitted their wives and daughters—was left essentially unchanged for more than half a century of increased availability of gold; and the new law of 1512 seems, without comment, to have reduced this allowance. It is true that three merchants whose wives wore golden chains worth 25 florins apiece in contravention of the law were hauled before a magistrate in 1453, but they escaped conviction by arguing that since the jewellery had been hidden by their clothes, it had not set a bad example. Public morality, not money, was the magistrate's concern.

II

The church came at sumptuary legislation through the same moralistic door. Suspicious of an economy whose health lay in expansion, dependent on the use and manipulation of money, churchmen worried not about the economic consequences of the withdrawal of wealth from productive enterprise, but about the personal and social consequences of the victory of *luxuria*. If civic governments spoke of public and private ruin, the church spoke of corruption. The friars, confessors of the medieval Italian cities, looked to sumptuary legislation as a weapon in the war against sin. . . . St. Thomas had allowed that female display, even if it enhanced natural beauty, was usually not a sin so long as it was employed in pursuit of a husband; it was, in any case, venial, not mortal. The Franciscan Orpheus de Cancellariis rejected this argument. The sin was mortal, he argued, not only because it was in contempt of God, but because, by threatening to ruin the fathers or husbands who supplied the wherewithal for their finery, women were a peril to others. And when their dress or habits were provocative; when, for example, they bared their shoulders or even their breasts, they became a public scandal. Orpheus admitted that the measure of extravagance was tied to fortune and that a woman could wear rich clothes without evil intention, but such expenses became a mortal sin if the clothes were unsuited to her station or would impoverish her and hence reverse her station. San Bernardino of Siena went even further to set the question of extravagant dress in the context of social charity, condemning extravagant trousseaux as extracted from the blood of the poor. . . .

Renewed episcopal activity under the influence of a strong papacy probably stimulated sumptuary legislation throughout Italy in this period. In some places, the church assumed full or substantial responsibility for the promulgation of the law. Citizens seem to have found episcopal legislation particularly hard to bear, both because of its severity and because of its penalty—excommunication. When Ginevra Sforza married Sante Bentivoglio in 1454, clothed with twelve attendants in gold brocade, a cloth the sumptuary law of Cardinal Bessarion had just denied to all Bolognese women, the church of San Petronio closed its doors to the bridal party. It

went on to San Giacomo, where the friars married the couple, but some of the party suffered excommunication for flouting the law. . . .

It would be wrong to see sumptuary legislation as a simple response to ecclesiastical demands. Initially the aims of the church and those of city governments seem to have differed. Cardinal Latino, whose limitation of trains was in line with contemporary urban legislation, also ruled that women must cover their heads, an ordinance which, according to Salimbene—if no lover of women, an admirer of their abilities—encouraged the production of silken veils woven with gold, "which all the more encouraged lust in the eye of the beholder." But this concern for female modesty did not find its way into contemporary civic codes, which on the contrary began to restrict first the sumptuousness of female head coverings and then the anonymity they might provide. Yet ecclesiastical attempts to control seductiveness in female dress (and deportment) do seem to have made headway throughout Italy in the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Piacenzan chronicler De Mussis was commenting as early as 1388 on "shameful dresses . . . called *ciptinae* . . . which . . . have such a large neck that the breasts show: and it looks as if the said breasts want to burst from the bosom." But only one commune, Perugia, whose legislation already reflected the influence of ecclesiastics, had acted (in 1342) to control *décolletage* "beneath the collarbone." Milan, where the Dominican Galvano Fiamma had disapproved in the first half of the fourteenth century of the bare throats and necks of its women, seems to have waited for almost a century before legislating against such exposure, and then only in the mildest way: low-cut necklines were allowed as long as the shoulder bones were covered in some other way. The law encouraged women to resort to those shoulder covers of transparent silk mousseline (often embroidered with gold) which formed a part of many contemporary trousseaux. It was only at the end of the fifteenth century that Milan, in legislation of 1498, outlawed necklines lower than one finger—placed sideways, as they took care to specify—from the collar-bone.

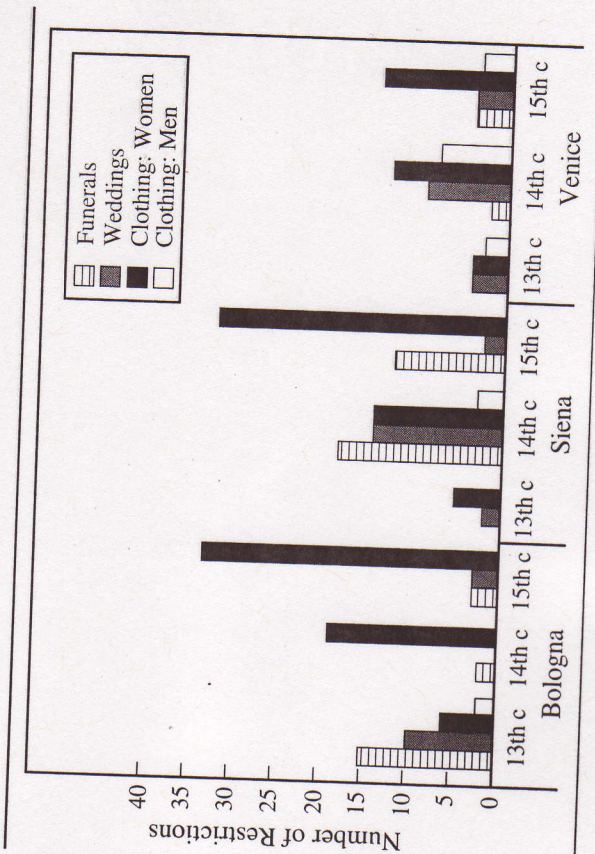
By then a movement to cover female flesh was under way. Florence had already, in a law of 1456, forbidden any "baring of the throat and neck" although in 1464 the government had relented and allowed a *décolletage* of about three centimetres from the collar-bone in front and twice that amount from the neckbone behind, measures which, as portraits of the period show, were not rigidly observed. Savonarola, however, made of *décolletage* a major issue, insisting on a two-finger measure. Like the Franciscan Orpheus de Cancellaris, who reminded his readers that the baring of shoulders and breasts, by making the woman a public scandal, brought style to the level of mortal sin, Savonarola inquired whether such display was the sign of an honest woman. By the sixteenth century, Venice and even Genoa, whose women had a reputation for daring display, had begun to regulate the amount of flesh they might expose. A Genoese law of 1506 insisted on lower hemlines, while one of 1511–12 decreed that women must cover completely their shoulders and the "two bones before the throat," regulations that neighbouring Savona copied in 1531. A Venetian law of 1562 ruled more liberally, and certainly more realistically, that camisoles or other coverings of the shoulder must be "so closed in front that the breast is covered." Whatever the details of the legislation, they had become persuaded that such rules were necessary to ensure "la honestà muliebri [honest wife]."

The growing association in Italian cities of *décolletage* with shame should be seen in

the context of a larger change in the direction of the law. Early sumptuary legislation can be divided fairly evenly into laws concerning clothes (often those of men as well as women), weddings and funerals. Although the expenses involved in the ceremonies and feasts accompanying marriage and burial rose steadily with their further elaboration and although new and extravagant customs surrounding parturition and baptism ate into household budgets, legislation directed against ceremony declined significantly in the fifteenth century in relation to that directed against clothing, particularly the clothing of women. While some of this can be accounted for by legislators' attempts to counter rapid changes in style or evasions in the law, like those Sacchetti relates, that alone cannot explain the change, which the preambles to the laws enshrine. The preambles to the Venetian sumptuary laws of 22 May and 9 June 1334 locate in both sexes the extravagance they intend to attack, but that of 1360 mentions only "vanities" which are directed towards "brides and other women and ladies." Most fifteenth-century preambles state explicitly that women are the ruin of men.

. . . In Bologna, Cardinal Bessarion's law did provoke a female protest—from Sante Bentivoglio's learned and beautiful lover, Niccolosa Sanuti, whom Sabadino degli Arienti described on a hillside wearing a gown of purple silk and a rose-coloured cloak lined with the finest ermine. She might have heard of events a year earlier in Siena, where the Emperor Frederick III had stopped with his fiancée Leonora of Portugal on the way to their coronation and marriage in Rome. Battista Petrucci, the daughter of a professor of rhetoric, had given a Latin recitation so appreciated by the couple that they asked her to select a reward. She chose release from all sumptuary regulations, a request which the city government reluctantly conceded. Sanuti, however, argued not only for herself but for all the women of Bologna.

TABLE 1 A Comparison of Sumptuary Restrictions in Three Cities



Her elegant oration reminded the cardinal that although Roman women had been limited in their use of gold and precious cloth during the rigours of the Second Punic War, freedom in finery was restored to them after the crisis had passed. That law, imposed by conditions of war, might be understandable, but it was hard to excuse the Bolognese restrictions, devised to feed the avarice of husbands who put money before dignity. They showed no concern for the domestic disruptions which would be a certain consequence of their restrictions, an argument that some Paduan nobles would use at the beginning of the next century in an attempt to defeat that city's sumptuary controls over women. The histories of women of the ancient world as well as the lives of many women of her own day proved, she argued, that feminine abilities could equal those of men: many resembled that "Amesias, whom, since she bore a manly spirit beneath a female form, they called Androgynos." Individual women of Bologna could rise, like some of their Greek and Roman predecessors, to heroic action; and collectively, she reminded the cardinal, they had within them the power of the Sabines—to save a civilization from demographic ruin. Women deserved freedom of choice in clothes because it was to clothes that they had been reduced. If one conceded (as surely the cardinal would) that "as patricians from the people, so should remarkable women differ from the obscure," then, she concluded, the sumptuary restrictions should be lifted. "Magistracies are not conceded to women; they do not strive for priesthoods, triumphs, the spoils of war, because these are considered the honours of men. Ornament and apparel, because they are our insignia of worth, we cannot suffer to be taken from us."

In a letter to her lover on the eve of his marriage to Ginevra Sforza, a despairing Nicolosa Sanuti recanted. But she had been right. Clothes were women's insignia, and the legislators knew it. They knew, too, that men had become implicated in them: they designed and made them, their money bought them, their status was reflected in them. In 1343 the rich women of Florence lined up before a notary to register the clothes they owned which were in contravention of the recently promulgated sumptuary law, which allowed that such clothes might continue to be worn as long as they were taxed and marked with a special lead seal bearing the Florentine lily on one side and a cross on the other. The clothes, recorded in an extant register, show that same restless variety as the laws designed to control them: dresses (usually of silk) take the form of sleeved and sleeveless underdresses and overdresses, often accompanied by cloaks and mantles, in various hues of red, blue and green, sometimes striped or pierced with white or contrasting colours, trimmed with fabric embroidered or woven with crowns, stars, rosettes, butterflies, birds and dragons. But from such sumptuous riot some order emerges. Lady Guerriera, the wife of Jacopo di Antonio de Albizis, and her sisters-in-law Nera and Piera all registered gowns and matching tunics of green samite (a heavy silk often interwoven with gold). The same Guerriera and Nera registered mantles of white cloth embroidered with vines and grapes of blood-red and lined in cloth of shimmering white. Their clothes appear just after those of their mother-in-law Joanna, who distinguished herself from them in counterpoint: a cloak of purple to their white and blood-red; a dress of scarlet with silken crowns, which reflected the green of the gowns of her daughters-in-law only in its lining. Dinga, the daughter of Sandro Altovito, and Lisabetta, the daughter of Gentile Altovito, came together to register their identical and elaborate tunics,

which were divided into two spheres of red, then checked with silk, and trimmed with yet another fabric. Relationships can be as easily guessed from the clothing lists as from the names. Nor are we dealing here with simple thrift—some cloth and a tailor for all the women of a household. Lady Ginevra, the wife of Agnolo di Giani de Albizis, probably a distant relative of Joanna and her daughters-in-law, who lived in another district of the city, had earlier registered the single piece of her clothing which was in contravention of the law and on which she chose to pay the tax—a mantle of white cloth embroidered with vines and blood-red grapes, lined in cloth of shimmering white. Those brilliant and distinctive cloaks must have become Albizi insignia. Even the limited view of wardrobe that this register of outlawed clothes gives us provides a glimpse of a society that described itself through clothes. Is it any wonder that the ordering of dress became for legislators a metaphorical way of talking about social distinction, a way of ordering human relations?

III

Fashion, in its delicate balancing of "the desire for imitation and differentiation," signifies, as Simmel observed, "the form of the social process." Unlike more hierarchical societies, whose rules repressed such a process, or poorer ones, whose poverty forbade it, the urban society of medieval Italy measured progress in terms of its dynamic. . . . But sumptuary law of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries sought to restrain, not to re-order. . . . Most of the others regulated yardage, material and ornament. If this reflected the realities of dress, which was of simple cut, depending for its effect on the quality and amount of material and on accompanying ornament, it also reflected a society more attuned to excess than disorder.

By the middle of the fifteenth century, however, as women's costume, with the extraordinary development of ruffs, bodices and detachable sleeves, became a series of interchangeable parts, fashion and change became a new target of the law. It sought to regulate the rapidly shifting parts of an unstable whole, which even Cesare Vecellio, in his popular book on fashion, found hard to grasp. In Venice on the eve of the crisis of the League of Cambrai the Senate debated fashions in sleeves. The debate had begun in 1503 when the legislators outlawed "manege a comedo," those great leg-of-mutton sleeves which Lotto's subjects so favoured for their portraits and which the Senate found "an ugly fashion" requiring three or more *brachia* [arm-lengths] of cloth of gold or silk for their execution. By October 1504 the senators recognized that that "dishonest fashion that is not appropriate to women" had been replaced by "another fashion, larger and uglier than the first," and they decided to ban all sleeves wider than one third of a *brachia* at any point. Within a year, they were outlawing "certain fashions and new apparel, both offensive and dishonest, which were never before used in this city"—namely, sleeves cut of many pieces of fabric of diverse colours. On 4 January 1507, the Senate complained that sleeves of the *investidura* had grown larger every time the matter had been legislated about. "And if [women] are granted the right to put six *brachia* [into the sleeves], in a few months they will grow to an even larger size, so that they can be called not sleeves of the *investidura* but sleeves of the gown itself and it will become necessary to concede

more." They repeated the former limits and restricted the sleeves of the gown, the so-called "manege ducali [ducal sleeves]," to 32 *braccia* of silk or 28 of serge or another non-silken fabric. In the difficult summer of 1509, the doge spoke before the *Maggior Consiglio* [Great Council] and accounted for Venice's decline by the inordinate length of its sleeves. The concern for expense is, of course, ever present: every extra *braccia* was a drain on the individual, and the point of the doge's speech was to encourage Venetian nobles to pay their state debts. But in the eyes of Renaissance legislators, fashion changes bred worse than excess or extravagance, they bred disorder....

... Useful splendour was one thing, fashion another. Under the rule of fashion, clothing lost both its real function and its emblematic significance. Shoes that impeded walking, robes and accessories that confused or concealed rather than expressed identity—such perversions were the sign of a profoundly disordered society. The Milanese friar Pietro Casola remarked on the similarity between the Chinese custom of binding women's feet to make them smaller and the Venetian one of wearing shoes on platforms so that "they appear giants." If such shoes kept feet from the mire, the legislators knew that women really wore them because "through the height of the shoes gowns can be made much longer." The resulting "enormous and excessive expenses" were to be lamented, but the chief concern of the laws enacted against them was functional: these shoes, like bound feet, impeded walking to such an extent that, according to Casola, some women "are only kept upright by the support of slaves." Legislation against veils, which seems to have begun in Siena in 1343 and had little economic purpose, was concerned with the freedom from proper identification that such veils accorded their wearers. Officials of the commune were empowered to demand, on encountering a veiled woman, the name of her father and husband, her "terzo," "popolo" and "contrada" [the area and specific neighborhood she lived in]. This let them discover the names of those responsible for paying the fine if her clothing was in contravention of the sumptuary law but, more importantly, it restored an identity which clothes were meant to convey, not obscure. The perversion of purpose of the shoes and clothing perverted the wearer and society itself....

The difference between *meretrix* [prostitute] and *matrona* [matron] stands at the heart of sumptuary distinction. Zaleucus' suggestion that only prostitutes be permitted rich dress as a means of shaming the virtuous into simplicity was taken up in the laws of some Italian cities: Siena allowed them not only platform shoes but also the dresses of cloth of gold and clothes painted or embroidered with trees, fruits, flowers and animals which it denied to other women; Brescia devised similar allowances. In other cities, prostitutes were assigned more humiliating marks of distinction: in Venice, yellow scarves; in Milan, a cloak of common fustian, whose colour—white in the original law of 1412—was changed to black in the new sumptuary code of 1498. In most places prostitutes were increasingly segregated. In Genoa, for example, a city that did not identify them by either rich clothing or humiliating marks, a series of laws began at the end of the fourteenth century to confine prostitutes to a special district. This made it easier for communal officials to stand at the bordello door and collect the new tax imposed in 1418; but fiscal purposes were secondary. Prostitutes were considered such outsiders in Ferrara by the end of the fifteenth century that responsibility for them was assigned to the same officials who collected the taxes on imported goods....

... Nevertheless, at least part of the law's purpose was more positive than contemporary preaching and moralizing might seem to suggest. It sought to reconcile a woman's dual legal personality, as the daughter of one lineage and wife in another. The moment of reconciliation was marriage, when men's honour and position were most publicly displayed through their women, particularly through brides in whom the honour and position of the two houses merged. The bride, at that moment, dowered and arrayed in a trousseau, stood poised between the two sumptuary states—between childhood, when to a greater or lesser extent she might be indulged, and matronhood, when she would be struck by the full force of the sumptuary law....

Although when she married, a trousseau pushed the Genoese bride towards sumptuary adulthood, the law demanded three further years of partial restraint when she could not receive from either her own family or her husband's any more than one silk dress, which could not, in any case, be dyed a fine red, and when all garments of silk pile were denied her. Three years from the day she crossed the threshold of her husband's house (the so-called *transductio*), she came of sumptuary age. Within this long period, the daughter was separated from her father's largesse, which was restored only on the day of her marriage, as trousseau; on this she had to live and dress while she was integrated into her new home. By the end of that period, it might well be understood that she would produce an heir and so move physically as well as legally from the status of *sponsa* [bride] to that of *matrona* [matron]. The period of greatest sumptuary restraint and special sumptuary status thus coincided with those years when her sexuality (and hence the honour of the man who was her legal guardian) was most at risk: when sexually mature, she had no husband; when married, she had borne no child.

No city found such distinctions totally satisfactory. By the beginning of the following century, Genoa had decided to allow girls to wear until they were taken into marriage golden headresses that the law would deny them as wives. The new approach may have been made necessary by the growing inability of fathers to arrange unaided the marriages of their daughters. Every city had come to feel by the fifteenth century that the institution of marriage itself had become a source of social disorder, from which fathers and daughters, not husbands, suffered most....

If demographic evidence suggests that men were marrying later and less frequently and that the convents were becoming fuller, the sumptuary evidence suggests that women who did marry were felt to have the whip hand over husbands whose livelihood seemed more and more to depend on their dowries. It is no wonder that such men lashed out at the changing fashions of their wives, which not only ate into the estate but also seemed to signify their loss of control....

Women were an object of fear, their power sufficient to ruin cities. Yet there was a gulf between most of the urban legislation and the ecclesiastical ranting of contemporary Isaiah who sought to "smite with a scab the crown of the head of the daughters of Zion" because they "are haughty, and walk with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes, walking and mincing as they go, and making a tinkling with their feet." For it was issued by men who were fully implicated in female folly. They lived off the condemned dowries, they paid for the forbidden dresses, whose splendour reflected their status, and they generally appeared in court and paid the fines demanded for contravention of the law by their women. In talking about women, their dress and

deportment, men were talking about themselves and about their often conflicting roles as fathers and husbands. But they did not just talk, they acted.

We must distinguish between *enforcement*, which failed, and *legislating*, which achieved objects of its own. The doge Andrea Gritti, on the way to the ceremonies marking his coronation in 1523, was being ostentatious in sending home a female relative to change out of her outlawed dress of cloth of gold; just as the earlier wedding festivities of a Corner and Loredan in the city in 1512 when "the women [were] obedient to the ordinance [because] they feared the *provedadori* [Commissioners] would condemn them," are remembered for that concern. Where prosecutions were undertaken, appeal and influence often let the guilty escape. And, of course, one could simply take the fines as a kind of luxury tax, an experiment which had been tried as early as 1299 in Florence and which finds a place in the Genoese and Sienese legislation of the fifteenth century—*pagar le pompe* [paying for luxuries] as the Venetians said. The process of legislating had better success. The endless codes attest to it. So does the sense of development within them of, for example, the relations between fathers and daughters, husbands and wives.

It is striking in a society whose single most important transfer of personal assets had arguably become a woman's dowry (which even in marriage she continued to own) that so much legislation was designed to keep women from wearing their wealth. This infuriated women rich in their own right, as Niccolosa Sanuti's oration should not be equal to all," as the Genoese put it when they established jewellery limits based on the value of the dowry a woman took into her marriage. But the wealth which determined what a woman might wear was always paternal wealth—what she had received as her father's daughter. When Siena toyed with this system, in 1424, it limited the gifts husbands might give to their wives at marriage and established the limit as a percentage of the dowry. This system stressed patrilineal distinctions at a time when rising dowries were exaggerating them. If hungry husbands were the villains of sumptuary laws which set limits on dowries, the wealth they gained did not keep the wives who brought them from being distinguished, ever more clearly, as their fathers' daughters. . . .

. . . Renaissance legislators tried to create order at those points in social organization where structure was ambivalent, particularly where social ideology was in conflict with many social practices. Their society had an ideology of orders but was in practice governed by money, which could alter position and rank. Clothes were a visible sign of this conflict: a better tax position would probably have let Messer Lorenzo's wife clothe herself in cloth of gold. Their society had a patrilineal ideology but was governed in everyday life by a confusion of cognatic, patrilineal and conjugal arrangements. This had the effect of splintering women's social identity, while giving them, as status-bearers of their fathers' lineage and their husbands', a position of increasing dominance within the household. High dowries and accompanying marital gifts were a sign of this, diminishing fathers and the economic strength of the patrimony, and at the same time diminishing the power of husbands in the home. These structural inconsistencies, for which there was no real cure, created social tensions which the legislation sought to remedy and which the *process* of legislating may have eased. They became clearly visible in Italian cities in the thirteenth century, as

men who rose through money became politically significant and assumed political power and as urban governments, freed from aristocratic control, began in a concerted way to attack lineal bonds and organization. It is not a coincidence that this was when the sumptuary legislation began.

Italian sumptuary legislation was, among other things, an approach to easing tensions caused by structural problems of a local social nature. Though it resembled the legislation of the northern monarchies, and even more closely that of German and Swiss cities, it was far less hierarchical than the one and far more anti-feminist than both. But Europe did in a sense form a sumptuary whole, expressing its frustration over social problems it could not fully solve through legislative control over their outward signs. These signs can be controlled by formal, often religious means in societies where orders attain the rigidity of caste, and they are generally allowed as more legitimate expressions of identity in a society ordered by class. In Renaissance Italy, a society that dreamed of orders while facing the daily consequences of class fluidity, they had to be controlled by legislation.

DOCUMENTS

In the first and second documents two painters record the contracts for commissions they have received and then note when the work of art was finished and paid for. Neri di Bicci was a successful, though second-rate, painter in mid-fifteenth-century Florence, and Paolo Farinati was a well-known artist who lived and worked in the provincial city of Verona toward the end of the sixteenth century. Both men kept track of all their commissions and other commercial transactions in journals, somewhat like the *ricordanze* kept by so many Florentine merchants. The journals (which are among the very few artists' journals that have survived) reveal that they were sensible businessmen who were willing to do a wide variety of work in order to satisfy their customers and keep their workshops busy. Note that they do not arrive at the final price to be paid for their work in the same way: Neri agrees to wait until he finishes the altarpiece in order to negotiate the price, but Farinati sets the fee for his frescoes as he begins. This difference reflects important changes in the valuation of painting that occurred in the century separating the two men, as well as Farinati's higher status and local renown. Farinati's house, for example, is sufficiently elegant to serve as a model for some of the work he does for his customers.

The next document is an inventory of an aristocratic household in mid-sixteenth century Verona and typical of its time in the organization of its rooms and furnishings. This is not an especially lavish establishment; no clothing and only one painting is listed, perhaps because such valuables were removed by the heirs or the executor before the inventory was taken. Nevertheless, the many bedcoverings, tapestries, rugs, napkins, and other textiles were quite valuable in their own right. Three examples of sumptuary legislation from Venice, which attempted to control the costs of weddings, regulate women's dress, and limit the size of banquets, complete the section.