‘What’s far fetch’d, and dearly bought’

The Politics of Clothing in Poetry from Eighteenth-Century Ireland

Lucy Collins

Clothing occupies a dynamic and varied role in poetry written in English from eighteenth-century Ireland, adding realistic detail and symbolic significance to many forms of verse representation. In this essay I will examine the implications of this representation for our understanding of the interwoven character of individual subjectivity and commodity culture. Sartorial choices offer important insights into personal and political relationships, into the status of the wearer, and his or her individual or group identity. Clothing shapes domestic and personal transactions, where relationships – especially sexual relationships – are negotiated through processes of observation, praise and gifting. As well as its practical purposes, dress offers symbolic readings, and is linked to issues of representation itself: to the process of self-fashioning in times of social change, and to the relationship between appearance and reality. It is also, in this period, fundamental to the process of gender and national representation, and to our understanding of Ireland’s economic place in the early modern world.

In addition, the representation of textiles in poetry offers insight into patterns of consumption in Ireland during the eighteenth century, and into changing domestic arrangements that saw increasing use of finished materials in home furnishing as well as in clothing. The sourcing and consumption of textiles played an important role in the economics of individuals and households, which in turn may be linked to the development of a sustained commodity culture. The study of textile representation reveals much about the development of international trade and the movement of goods and fashions between cultures. Throughout Europe and the colonial world, the eighteenth century was a period of increasing volume and complexity in commerce, with a dramatic growth in the movement of raw materials, and manufactured goods. In 1688 it was estimated that over 79 million articles of apparel entered the English stock and this volume would be further increased in the century that followed.¹ Between 1700 and 1770 England’s Atlantic trade rose sixfold, with cloth and clothing – including Asian cottons and silks – representing a significant part of this commercial growth.² Clothing is a site of resistance and a means by which both individual and community in eighteenth-century Ireland might express the differences between Irish tastes and those current in England. It is also indicative of the dynamics of cultural assimilation that exerted a powerful force on the more privileged sectors of Irish society.

The study of clothing says much about social practices in a given period, but also offers insight into the articulation of individual subjectivity within social norms. Inevitably, both consumerism and its representation in poetry reveal most about the upper and middle classes. The poorer strata of society became more engaged with

¹ N. B. Harte, quoted in Robert Ross, *Clothing: A Global History* (London: Polity, 2013), loc. 832.

² Robert S. DuPlessis, *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 7.

material culture as the century progressed but, in these texts, they are largely seen through the eyes of educated poets.³ This limitation, together with predominance of Protestant perspectives in these texts, offers a partial reading of the period, but one which nonetheless reveals much about the private and public lives of citizens. While scholarship has greatly enhanced our understanding of the design, manufacture and trade in textiles, literary texts offer insights into the personal and social significance of clothing. As Chloe Wigston Smith writes: 'Similar to the humanist tradition from which they borrow, eighteenth-century theories of poetics and oratory traffic in sartorial allusions, painting a verbal world draped in figurative pieces of clothing, accessories, and textiles'.⁴ In the poetry of the period, passing details of male and female dress enrich the texture of representation, while closer observation draws attention to the social and economic significance of textiles. Poems about clothes are also about signification, on aesthetic as well as political grounds.

Dress and National Identity

The history of Irish dress in the early modern period is both closely linked to English styles and practices, and distinctively different from them. Before the sixteenth century, Irish dress had a particular character, with a notable combination of structured and unstructured use of fabric.⁵ Women were typically dressed in smocks and mantles, together with linen headdresses: in the words of John Speed, 'the women wore their hair plaited in [a] curious manner, hanging down their backs and shoulders, from under folded wreaths of fine linen, rolled about their heads'.⁶ This practice finds its way into poems such as the anonymous 'Hesper-Neso-Graphia: or, A Description of the Western Isle' (c.1715), in which the wife of the noble, native Irish chieftain Gillo is described thus: 'Her Head Ten hundred Linnen bound,/As white and fine as could be found'.⁷ Though fashions in Ireland were often similar to those found in rural England, any overt difference could have strong political connotations. Irish clothing was judged, by town dwellers of English extraction, to be backward and its continued use was itself a mark of resistance to English domination of Ireland. After the rebellion of 1641, for example, the wearing of 'bands, ruffs, hats, cloaks, gowns, breeches &c' (that is, clothes common to the English) was largely replaced by a return to 'kerchiefs, mantles, trousers... and all Irish habit'.⁸ The difference registered in this description reflected English distrust of Irish practices, respectability being linked to

³ Andrew Carpenter in 'Working-Class Writing in Ireland before 1800: "Some must be poor – we cannot all be great"' discusses the limited sources available for the period: 'few of the poor left written records and only law-breakers and objects of charity emerge from anonymity in the archives'. *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing*, ed. Michael Pierse (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 73.

⁴ Chloe Wigston Smith, *Women, Work, and Clothes in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), loc. 168.

⁵ Irish male dress of the sixteenth century consisted of short jackets with sleeves slit to allow the shirting worn beneath to flow out. Mairead Dunlevy, *Dress in Ireland: A History* (London: Batsford, 1989), 46-59.

⁶ David Beers Quinn, *The Elizabethans and the Irish* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1966), 95.

⁷ Anonymous, 'Hesper-Neso-Graphia: or, A Description of the Western Isle', *Verse in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, ed. Andrew Carpenter (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 123.

⁸ Quoted in Toby Barnard, *Making the Grand Figure: Lives and Possessions in Ireland 1641-1770* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 253.

the wearing of English styles.⁹ This observation alone gives an early indication of the ways in which clothing would signify inclusion or exclusion, indicating conformity to – or deliberate rejection of – social norms and shared values.

In seventeenth-century Ireland, cultural allegiances were clearly pronounced, and fashion-conscious town dwellers relied on London-based acquaintances to guide their choices of fabric and styles, greatly increasing the demand for clothing of English manufacture.¹⁰ Before large-scale industrial production was developed anywhere in Europe, needlewomen worked in their own homes to produce materials, which would be gathered by contractors and sold on. So great was the demand that these processes became part of female education in England – a charity school in London allowed one of its teachers to arrange that the schoolgirls might ‘work for the persons who want needle work and such things done’.¹¹ In Ireland, too, girls of the artisan class were regularly instructed in sewing. These skills were not only an important means by which women could contribute to the household economy, they also facilitated a degree of creativity in personal presentation, which signified a welcome resistance to early manifestations of commodity culture. Mrs Barry, Lady Mayoress of Dublin between 1601 and 1611, was praised for the ingenuity of her appearance at a public function: ‘Her coif was wrought with gold at the expense of her own labour and not of her husband’s purse’.¹²

The growing interest in imported goods would have a significant impact on Ireland’s economic development in the course of the eighteenth century and, from an early stage, it was tempered by particular cultural values and political allegiances. Richard Lawrence, a member of the Irish Council of Trade in 1682, had itemised widespread objections to extravagant dress, which he considered to engender pride and lust and ‘to wear off that due Reverence and Respect Inferiors owe to Superiors’.¹³ Such moral judgments were more fiercely expressed when prompted by moments of cultural crisis. A Jacobite song – transcribed from Gaelic sources in 1767, but depicting the Siege of Limerick in 1690 – describes the ‘false traitors’

With their half silks and satians fine ribbons and laces
Their gloves of smooth shamy and vizards on faces
Comparing to ladys of noble extraction
Maintaining the mode and newest of fashions
Forgetting their kerches of bandle cloath weaving
Their pomps and frize mantles and black Tammy wearing.¹⁴

Here foppish clothing reveals a specific act of national betrayal, as well as signalling the unhealthy fickleness of fashion itself. It stands in contrast to the depiction of an ‘Irish Trooper’, from a broadside poem of the 1690s, who returns from Limerick ‘like

⁹ Dunlevy, *Dress in Ireland*, 69.

¹⁰ Dunlevy, *Dress in Ireland*, 66.

¹¹ Ross, *Clothing*, loc. 865.

¹² John T. Gilbert, *Calendar of Ancient Records of Dublin*, IV (1894), xxii, quoted in Dunlevy, *Dress in Ireland*, 68.

¹³ Dunlevy, *Dress in Ireland*, 83.

¹⁴ Poem Five in Diarmaid Ó Muirithe, “‘Tho’ Not in Full Stile Compleat”: Jacobite Songs from Gaelic Manuscript Sources’, *Eighteenth-Century Ireland: Iris an dá chultúr*, VI (1991), 97-8.

a poor tatter'd Rogue,/Without e'er a Shirt, Coat, Stocking, or Brogue'.¹⁵ These extremes of experience highlight the role of clothing in the shaping of public narratives in early modern Ireland.

'The Universal Use of Irish Manufacture'

The increasing appearance of material culture as the backdrop to human activity in eighteenth-century Ireland ran parallel with more complex negotiations concerning the economic implications of luxury imports. By the early eighteenth century Dublin was the second city of the British Isles and the centre of commercial and retail activity. Already, the loyalty of the Anglo-Irish Protestants had been tested by the export restrictions placed on Irish woollen manufactures, indicating the English parliament's desire to protect the market for their own goods both at home and abroad.¹⁶ Though Irish textile production was small-scale in comparison with its English counterparts, it had an important place within regional economies. The linen industry was especially significant in the North East of the country, where production was domestic except for finishing and bleaching, which was managed by the drapers who fulfilled a distribution role.¹⁷ Since agricultural prices were so low, many farmers also worked as weavers, meaning that the industry was closely linked to patterns of subsistence farming in the province. Irish weavers found it difficult to produce materials to match the popularity of imported textiles, and the high duties imposed on goods from Ireland entering English markets reduced the profits they could make abroad. Neither were these challenges confined to the British Isles: the mechanisation of silk production in London and Lyon was a cause for unrest both in Europe and further afield, and clarified the need for modernization in the Irish context.¹⁸ The changed conditions for workers that resulted – especially the loss of their established rights to waste materials – was a particular occasion for resistance. This altered appreciation of value, and of who should control every aspect of production process, is reflective of the volatility in manufacturing, particularly in the early stages of the industrial revolution.

Among the earliest texts to engage with this issue is Jonathan Swift's famous *A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture*. Written to coincide with the Dublin celebrations for King George I's sixtieth birthday in 1720, the tract reflects Swift's anger at the ill treatment of Ireland by the Whig establishment, and the restrictions placed on Irish trade, particularly that in textiles. The tract calls for a boycott on English goods, yielding the memorable maxim – 'burn everything that comes from England, except their people and their coals'. The main focus of the pamphlet, though, was to encourage support for materials woven in Ireland, and to demand that Irish people use their own rather than imported textiles:

¹⁵ 'Teague the Irish Trooper', *Verse in English from Tudor and Stuart Ireland*, ed. Andrew Carpenter (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003), 535.

¹⁶ Joep Leerssen, *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its Development and Literary Expression prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 295.

¹⁷ L. M. Cullen, *Life in Ireland* (London: Batsford, 1968), 82.

¹⁸ Mairead Dunlevy, *Pomp and Poverty: A History of Silk in Ireland* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 71.

What if the House of Commons had thought fit to make a resolution, *nemine contradicente*, against wearing any cloth or stuff in their families, which were not of the growth and manufacture of this kingdom? What if they had extended it so far as utterly to exclude all silks, velvets, calicoes, and the whole lexicon of female fopperies; and declared, that whoever acted otherwise should be deemed and reputed an enemy to the nation? [...] What if we should agree to make burying in woollen a fashion, as our neighbours have made it a law? What if the ladies would be content with Irish stuffs for the furniture of their houses, for gowns and, petticoats for themselves and their daughters?¹⁹

Projecting this as a matter of patriotism and of practical action in the face of a failing economy, Swift champions ingenuity in dress, rather than slavish adherence to fashion – ‘the ladies will look as handsome in stuffs as in brocades; and since all will be equal, there may be room enough to employ their wit and fancy, in choosing and matching patterns and colours’.²⁰ The removal of competitive need, he suggests, changes how the aesthetics of dress may be viewed. While the stipulation that only local textiles should be purchased was intended to create work for distressed weavers, the extent to which these gestures translated into economic gain for either weavers or traders was uncertain. One reason for this is that traders, traditionally, extended generous credit terms to their noble customers. After a particularly rich display of Irish cloth at a ball in 1731, Katherine Conolly judged that ‘shopkeepers had the worst of it, for of many thousands pounds laid out, very few hundreds [were] paid’.²¹

Women were increasingly seen as pivotal to this patriotic movement, due to their appetite for fashion, as well as their influence on the purchasing of luxury goods for the home. Swift – often ready to satirize female behaviour – wrote a poem entitled ‘The Journal of a Modern Lady’: the first printing of the poem (1729) carries the title ‘The Journal of a Dublin Lady’ begins his ‘annals of a female day’ acknowledging its satirical potential while claiming zealous commitment to the praise of women. This lady’s day begins at noon, and quickly yields to the persuasion of the purveyors of fabric, essential to fashion and status.

Now to another scene give place,
Enter the folks with silks and lace:
Fresh matter for a world of chat,
Right Indian this, right Mechlin that.
“Observe this pattern; there’s the stuff!
I can have customers enough.
Dear madam, you are grown so hard,
This lace is worth twelve pounds a yard:
Madam, if there be truth in man,
I never sold so cheap a fan”.²²

¹⁹ Jonathan Swift, *The Works of Jonathan Swift, containing additional letters, tracts and poems, not hitherto published* (Edinburgh: Constable, 1814), 19.

²⁰ Swift, *Works*, 20.

²¹ Quoted in Barnard 254.

²² Swift, *Complete Poems*, 367.

The sophistication of the wares available to a Dublin lady in 1729 is linked to international commerce and manufacture. This was at the height of the textile trade between India and Europe, and printed fabrics from the east were in high demand. Belgian lace was similarly prized and here it is textile as commodity that is key to the reading – the woman bargaining and the seller persuading her of the value of what he brings. Placing trade at the centre of the exchange, Swift emphasises the significance of materiality in the negotiation between individuals.

A decade later, in 1740, the mathematics teacher Laurence Whyte wrote an entertaining long poem entitled 'An Essay on Dunning'. This includes a poetic examination of debt as it existed in the intercourse between shopkeeper and shopper in the period. The role of costly textiles and the price of tailoring them are eloquently examined as part of the transaction. As in Swift's poem, the trader must operate first on trust, building a relationship with those who buy his goods, which include people from a wide range of social backgrounds – 'And o'er his Ledger when he looks,/Finds half a Province in his Books'.²³ The proliferation of customers reflects the great increase in imported commodities, which are part of a larger process of social mobility, and a desire to attain what is most sought after by others:

For Silks of all Sorts – the Lord knows
How many kinds of Callicoes,
Chints and Bengalls, for divers Changes,
From this, and to'ther side the Ganges;
With Hollands, Cambricks, Flanders Lace,
Whose Prices now we shall not trace,
Excepting one which as I've heard
Was sold for sixty Pounds per Yard,
Who wou'd not at a Bargain leap
When such fine lace was sold so cheap?
Since nothing is esteem'd or sought,
But what's far fetch'd, and dearly bought.²⁴

The economic implications of this seemingly insatiable appetite for exotic goods resulted in a variety of efforts to support Irish manufacture. The campaign – led by Jonathan Swift, Patrick Delany and Arthur Dobbs – to encourage the purchase of Irish-made textiles began in the 1720s and continued intermittently for the rest of the century, but it was 1745 before Irish weavers themselves mounted a petition against imported fabrics. The same year Mary Delany was presented at court in Dublin wearing Irish cloth; the following January she reported on a ball at Dublin Castle that was 'prodigiously crowded, and all the ladies were dressed in Irish stuff and never looked finer or more genteel'.²⁵ Many of the men, she noted, were in 'foreign finery', affirming the contrast between the men and the women – including the Vicereine, Lady Chesterfield – who were glad to express their practical support for the use of home produced textiles. Though these were important gestures of solidarity, it is

²³ Laurence Whyte, 'An Essay on Dunning', *The Collected Poems of Laurence Whyte*, ed. Michael Griffin (Lewisburg PA: Bucknell University Press, 2016), 52.

²⁴ Whyte 53. Callicoes, Chints and Bengalls are all cottons; Holland and Cambrick are linens. For further detail on fabrics and fashions in the poem, see footnotes by Michael Griffin.

²⁵ Dunlevy, *Dress in Ireland*, 94.

unlikely that they changed the economic balance in any significant degree, as Rachel Wilson has acknowledged:

Given that the vicereines were usually English and in Ireland only temporarily, their reasons for supporting this campaign can hardly be attributed to a strong sense of Irish patriotism. More likely, they sought to increase their own and their husbands' popularity, safe in the knowledge that the brevity of their stay and the fact that their efforts extended only to elite women and to Dublin, meant that their actions had only a minimal effect.²⁶

As Mary O'Dowd has argued, however, women's central involvement in the 'wear Irish' campaign had some social significance: 'It brought women into the public discourse, placed a value on their consumer power and therefore expanded their engagement with the public sphere'.²⁷

In the meantime, concerted efforts were being made to improve the quality of Irish textiles, in order to ensure long-term growth. In 1731, Thomas Prior, together with a group of his friends, founded the Dublin Society for the Promotion of Agriculture, Manufactures, Arts, and Sciences. The Society offered annual premiums or prizes for excellent performance in a range of activities that would support economic development in Ireland, including those relating to the production of textiles and the dissemination of weaving skills. In 1748 there were premiums for 'women who shall spin the most and best worsted the long way' and who taught children to do so.²⁸ Teaching children to spin linen yarn was also rewarded and there were premiums for 'the best patterns made by boys or girls for damask or painted linen'.²⁹ More tellingly, perhaps, there were incentives to manufacture large quantities of 'sound, merchantable linen cloth, 26 inches broad and upwards... fit for the use of servants and negroes in the British colonies and plantations'.³⁰ This emphasises the utility of linen production, and the importance of colonial markets, not for luxury goods but for serviceable fabric to clothe workers and slaves. Yet a government report of 1750 – more than twenty years after the drive to support Irish textiles had begun – estimated that a quarter of Irish inhabitants used imported commodities, with textiles and clothing the second most important category.³¹

Class and Commodity Culture

The ways in which dress is represented in this period reveal the close connections between embodied experience and the role of commodity culture within social and political structures. Beautiful apparel became closely linked to upward social mobility among the middle classes, and the female body became a locus of desire that was not

²⁶ Rachel Wilson, *Elite Women in Ascendancy Ireland, 1690-1745* (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2015), 114.

²⁷ Mary O'Dowd, 'Women and Patriotism in Eighteenth-Century Ireland', *History Ireland* 14.5 (Sept-Oct 2006): 28

²⁸ 'Premiums for Promoting Irish Manufacture', *Gentleman's Magazine* 18 (August 1748): 355.

²⁹ 'Premiums for Promoting Irish Manufacture', 355.

³⁰ 'Premiums offer'd by the Trustees for promoting the Linen Manufacture of Ireland', *Gentleman's Magazine* 18 (August 1748): 357

³¹ *A representation of the state of the trade of Ireland before the House of Lords in England* (Dublin, 1750), quoted in Barnard 256.

only sexual but also material. Elaborate dress was aesthetically pleasing, and expressive of wealth and taste, but it also affirmed the woman's body as an object of the male gaze, and thus of potential conquest. The parts of her body that could be glimpsed set natural beauty against that of manufactured style and offered a tantalising impression of what sexual intimacy might offer. Occasionally, specific crazes would attract widespread attention: the fashion for hooped underskirts in the 1740s occasioned much criticism, due to the impracticality of the design. Before public events where large crowds were expected, notices in newspapers requested women not to wear hoops, as they would seriously impede the movement of others.³² There was an additional reason for disapproval however – the hoops resulted in the exposure of a woman's legs as she sought to mount steps or climb into carriages. The anonymous 1742 poem 'On the Ladies Wearing Large Hoops' uses its own small space for a witty observation on the practice of Lycurgus of Sparta, who encouraged young men to marry by permitting them to see barely-clad women: 'But had the prudent Spartan known,/The Use of Hoops so wide;/Without those Arts, they might have shown/What here no Women hide.'³³

Such satirical texts reveal the unease surrounding the extremes of commodity culture, which became more pronounced as women's fashions became pre-eminent, surpassing those of men in elaboration and expense. Female acquisitiveness expressed a kind of social conformity that was closely tied to the increased materialism of social structures. Beautiful clothing became a reward for compliance – the 'good girls' in John Winstanley's poem 'Miss Betty's Singing-Bird' (1742) could expect to have 'all the finest, nicest Cloaths,/Rich Ribbons, Laces, Stockings, Shoes'.³⁴ Their engagement in leisure pursuits was linked to their being 'always fine, most nicely dress'd,/In what's most curious, rich and best'.³⁵ While here these accessories suggest status and respectability, they are undoubtedly the means by which these young girls enter a commodified world, both as a consumer and as a key part of the system of exchange. In this context, material comforts might fundamentally alter the station of the individual, resulting in what Jennie Batchelor has described as dress's 'contradictory status as both a means of self-expression and a potential facilitator of false self-creation'.³⁶ Anxieties concerning clothing's potential to mask, rather than to reveal, the social position of its wearer was hardly new, however. By the late seventeenth century the growth in middle class incomes encouraged investment in expensive apparel, a situation widely criticised in the newspapers throughout much of the eighteenth century: 'women who are not worth a Groat [should not] show like Ten Thousand Pounders; or the Daughters of poor and mean Artificers strive to take Place of Ladies born'.³⁷ Women of quality disliked seeing their social inferiors dressing

³² Dunlevy, *Dress in Ireland*, 106.

³³ 'On the Ladies Wearing Large Hoops', *Poems Written Occasionally by John Winstanley, Interspers'd with many Others, by Several Ingenious Hands* (Dublin: S. Powell, 1742), 258. It is unclear whether this poem was written by Winstanley himself, or by another poet.

³⁴ John Winstanley, 'Miss Betty's Singing-Bird', Carpenter, *Verse in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 273.

³⁵ Carpenter, *Verse in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 273.

³⁶ Jennie Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 3.

³⁷ *Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), 6-10 March 1764.

in the same way as they did, and the rapidity with which fashions changed was one way to challenge threats to social hierarchy, as well as to stimulate economic growth.³⁸ Laurence Whyte, in 'A Dissertation on Fashions', names French style the most sought after, and the most volatile – 'In Paris, it is nothing strange,/That Fashions with the Moon shou'd change;/Twelve times a Year, and sometimes more,/We have them from the Gallic shore'.³⁹ By contrast, he argues, Irish tastes fluctuated little, though this was mainly out of necessity, owing to the high costs of foreign textiles that were subject to English excise: 'Shou'd we so often change our Fashion,/'Twou'd prove destructive to the Nation'.⁴⁰

The complex relationship between class mobility and the pace of consumption is hinted at in many poems written in eighteenth-century Ireland, from varying social perspectives. In 1757, the anonymous author of 'The Prelude to a Levee calculated for the Meridian of the Castle of Dublin' addresses the role of social events in Dublin Castle as an occasion for self-presentation:

If you give a gen'ral Guess
At our Finances, mark our Dress
Rich Golden Lace, or high embroidery,
And all dear Fancies gay or taudry
"Unless on Peers, and great Commanders"
Are piteous Sights to shrewd By-standers.⁴¹

By indicating the tastelessness of dressing above one's station, the poem notes clothing's potential to obscure, rather than to reveal, the true character of the wearer. The contrast between those who are profligate in their pursuit of luxury and the 'purse-proud' man, 'whose money blackens in his Trunks' is noteworthy. Those most unconcerned about their appearance, the poet argues, are those with money to put to other uses. Around the same time, similar concerns found their way into poems from a less elevated social milieu, where the accumulation of luxury goods could nonetheless be seen as a deliberate attempt to gain superiority over one's neighbour. In some rural communities, in particular, frugality was prized. In an anonymous poem from the 1750s, written in Ulster Scots, the rector's wife berates the speaker – married to a farmer from the Lagan Valley:

Quo' she, "Ye go too fine,
With scarlet cloaks and bedgowns,
With velvet puggs and plaid-gowns,
With ruffled sleeves and headrounds,
More rich and gay than mine".⁴²

³⁸ Batchelor 7.

³⁹ Laurence Whyte, 'A Dissertation on Fashions, (or a Poem Ala-mode) Being a Sequel to the Essay on Dunning', Whyte 98-104.

⁴⁰ Whyte 99.

⁴¹ Dunlevy, *Dress in Ireland*, 94-5.

⁴² Anonymous, 'Tit for Tat; or the Rater Rated:', Carpenter, *Verse in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 305.

The tensions between frugality, on the one hand, and sensory pleasure in beautiful fabrics, on the other, created a dilemma for the experiencing subject, and the poem provided a useful space in which the rich variety of commodities could be enumerated, at the same time as a particular moral position could be voiced.

Excessive display was a preoccupation of the time, but it could take many forms. While the speaker in the poem quoted above transgresses through the elaborateness of her apparel, other women were represented as more eager to shed, than to accumulate, garments. 'The Modern Lass in High Dress in MDCCLVI' (1756) by Gorges Edmond Howard gives voice to a 'modern nymph' who displays 'every charm to win the sight,/And give to sense and heart delight'.⁴³ She rejects the 'prepost'rous prudish age' of her grandmother by enacting a kind of poetic striptease, revealing her bare neck and shoulders, her back naked to the waist,

The beauties too of limbs below,
Which friendly, curtail'd garments show;
And if th'indulgent gale blows high,
Others, that there adjacent lie.⁴⁴

The speaker's frank sexuality here is what defines her modernity. Other protagonists play a longer game, however, in which clothing limits intimacy until the prize of marriage is won. The woman in John Cunningham's 'Holyday Gown' (1766) competes with her peers for favour with a man: decked out in her 'holyday gown, and... new-fangled hat', she heads off to the fair to meet 'Brisk Roger'. Her rivals may receive ribbons, topknots and garters, but the speaker assures us that Roger has lavished still greater gifts on her:

He whisper'd such soft pretty things in mine ear!
He flatter'd, he promis'd, and swore!
Such trinkets he gave me, such laces and geer,
That trust me,—my pockets ran o'er.⁴⁵

This poem is structured around resistance – its refrain of 'I'd wed him, were I not so young' leading inevitably to a final yielding. Courtship is a form of transaction, in which gifts of clothing and adornment are the currency of seduction. While this woman embraces such an opportunity, even those who avoided the worst excesses of materialism could not eliminate their objectification in the eyes of the male bystander, as Batchelor argues:

women who dressed modestly were both commercially and sexually suspect. The persistent appeals made to women throughout the period to dress simply ultimately served to eroticise the modestly dressed woman, whose "simple adornment", like

⁴³ Gorges Edmond Howard, 'The Modern Lass in High Dress in MDCCLVI', Carpenter, *Verse in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 383.

⁴⁴ Carpenter, *Verse in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 383.

⁴⁵ John Cunningham, 'Holyday Gown', *Poems, chiefly pastoral* (Dublin, 1766), 106.

that of Rousseau's Sophie, was "put on" only to be removed bit by bit by the imagination.⁴⁶

Retail Trade and Popular Taste

Ireland's participation in the vastly expanded realm of international trade expressed both the increased spending power of the middle classes and the desire to match English taste and sophistication. In 1777 Arthur Young reflected on this situation:

The influx of wealth into that country brings a taste for the elegant luxuries with which we abound, and the capability of purchasing them ensures the purchase. An Englishman cannot go into a single house in Dublin, or see a person dressed, of either sex, without having this truth staring him in the face.⁴⁷

The influence of the court of Versailles could be seen both in London and Dublin, and French style was the focus of imitation, especially for women. Between 1777 and 1778, the *Magazin à la Mode*, a fashion journal written entirely in French, was published in Dublin.⁴⁸ A retail structure grew up around this demand for the latest trends; shops specialising in textiles, including lace, opened in Dublin from about 1760. New technologies, including advances in print and the growth in newspaper advertising, were exploited to engage potential purchasers.⁴⁹ Refinements in the textile production stimulated trade and increased diversification, so that even small merchants in rural settings stocked some fashion items.⁵⁰ Elaborate embroidery and fine lace was in high demand and specialist needs were met by a growing army of drapers, glovers, hosiers, milliners and wig-makers, as well as by shops that provided both ready-made clothes and a range of accessories such as caps, handkerchiefs and muffs. These retailers were often obliged to offer credit to customers to facilitate sales, and their profits were further undermined by an increase in shoplifting, including one ingenious case reported in the *Hibernian Journal* of 1785:

A woman entered a haberdashers in Grafton Street and examined fine lace on the counter, meanwhile keeping both hands crossed demurely over her heart. As she left, the shopkeeper realised a most valuable piece of lace had gone missing, as the lady "was possessed of a third hand, of. . . animation and dexterity". One of her exposed hands had been a fake, concealed by a glove.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Batchelor 10.

⁴⁷ Arthur Young, quoted in Sarah Foster, "'An Honourable Station in Respect of Commerce, as well as Constitutional Liberty': Retailing, Consumption and Economic Nationalism in Dublin, 1720-85', *Georgian Dublin*, eds Gillian O'Brien and Finola O'Kane (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008), 30.

⁴⁸ Foster, 'Honourable Station', 30.

⁴⁹ Chloe Wigston Smith draws specific connections between technologies advancing the production of clothing and of print: 'The British print industry developed in tandem with the textile industry: both domestic markets depended on similar technologies and on the same primary materials'. Smith loc. 262.

⁵⁰ Padhraig Higgins, *A Nation of Politicians: Gender, Patriotism and Political Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010), 86.

⁵¹ *Hibernian Journal*, 12 December 1785, quoted in Sarah Foster, "'Ornament and Splendour': Shops and Shopping in Georgian Dublin', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies* XV (2012): 25.

The lengths to which consumers would go for imported goods remained considerable, as Thomas Wallace indicated in 1798, when he reflected that ‘a piece of Irish mode being cut into two parts, one of which is shewed to a customer as Irish, the other, as English; the latter is always preferred’.⁵² The economic consequences of these preferences remained, and the last quarter of the century saw renewed calls for the support of Irish goods. The visibility of this backing was an important part of its purpose. In 1778 Charlotte Fitzgerald recounts attending a meeting of elite men and women who each pledged to make a garment from Irish linen: ‘It was fixed that we should all go to the Gardens upon such a day in our uniform that the mob might see that the nobility and gentry were inclined to favour the Irish manufactures’.⁵³ Despite such gestures, the nature and extent of the campaign had changed significantly to include a much greater number of the general public.⁵⁴ Newspaper correspondence confirms this expansion, and emphasises fairness as the touchstone of the Free Trade movement:

[It is] nothing more, or less, than a liberty to send our manufactures and our provisions where we please, without asking leave of the English, and to bring home anything our customers give us in return for them, without asking their leave for that either. That’s all; and isn’t it very fair.⁵⁵

As the eighteenth century drew to a close commodity culture was firmly established across gender and class divides. John Anketell’s ‘Stramore Patron’ (1793) dwells extensively on the finery of the young men and women attending festivities in Co. Monaghan. These are workers and servants, yet each has paid close attention to dress, and the poet records these details:

Dolly with care her scarlet cloak displays,
 Lac’d tightly in her mistress’ cast-off stays;
 While Laughlin struts, and seemingly looks big,
 With coarse black stockings, and his one-row wig.
 Here Peggy skips, dress’d in a yellow gown,
 Which cost in Skernageerah just a crown;
 New cap and ribands set her off with grace,
 And add fresh honors to her rosy face.⁵⁶

Elsewhere, of course, poets might suggest that the rise in consumption was a good thing since it stimulated the economy and provided work for the poor.⁵⁷ Upward mobility could be seen as having a positive effect on society – encouraging the working classes to aspire to greater things – but it also threatened the established social order.

⁵² Thomas Wallace, quoted in Foster, ‘Honourable Station’ 42.

⁵³ Quoted in Mary O’Dowd, ‘Politics, Patriotism, and Women in Ireland, Britain and Colonial America, c.1700-1780’, *Journal of Women’s History* 22.4 (Winter 2010), 30.

⁵⁴ The increased production and sale of patriotic ephemera meant that a much greater proportion of the general public could now be reached. Padhraig Higgins argues that this had an impact that neither parliamentary debates nor political pamphlets could achieve. Higgins 83.

⁵⁵ From the *Belfast News-Letter*, 14 March 1780, quoted in Higgins 87.

⁵⁶ John Anketell, ‘Stramore Patron’, Carpenter, *Verse in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, 493-4.

⁵⁷ For further discussion of this issues see Batchelor 7-18.

Together, these eighteenth-century poems illuminate the context for international trade in cloth, and its social and political consequences. From memorable verse and prose texts by Jonathan Swift – the greatest Irish writer of his age – to anonymous poems for popular consumption, these texts reflect the reach of commercial and economic factors in the lives and self-perception of those living in Ireland. The production and use of textiles were part of the lived experience across the social spectrum. They figured in poetry during this time not only for symbolic purposes, but also as a reflection of the significant role of political and economic factors in the writing and art of the century.

Works Cited

- Anonymous. *The Prelude to a Levee calculated for the Meridian of the Castle of Dublin*. Dublin, 1757.
- Barnard, Toby. *Making the Grand Figure: Lives and Possessions in Ireland 1641-1770*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2004.
- Batchelor, Jennie. *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Carpenter, Andrew. *Verse in English from Eighteenth-Century Ireland*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1997.
- Carpenter, Andrew. *Verse in English from Tudor and Stuart Ireland*. Cork: Cork University Press, 2003.
- Carpenter, Andrew. 'Working-Class Writing in Ireland before 1800: "Some must be poor – we cannot all be great"'. *A History of Irish Working-Class Writing*. Ed. Michael Pierse. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 72-88.
- Cullen, L. M. *Life in Ireland*. London: Batsford, 1968.
- Cunningham, John. *Poems, chiefly pastoral*. Dublin, 1766.
- Dunlevy, Mairead. *Dress in Ireland: A History*. London: Batsford, 1989.
- Dunlevy, Mairead. *Pomp and Poverty: A History of Silk in Ireland*. New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2011.
- DuPlessis, Robert S. *The Material Atlantic: Clothing, Commerce, and Colonization in the Atlantic World, 1650-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Foster, Sarah. "'An Honourable Station in Respect of Commerce, as well as Constitutional Liberty": Retailing, Consumption and Economic Nationalism in Dublin, 1720-85'. *Georgian Dublin*. Eds Gillian O'Brien and Finola O'Kane. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008. 30-44.
- Foster, Sarah. "'Ornament and Splendour": Shops and Shopping in Georgian Dublin'. *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies* XV (2012): 13-33.
- Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), 6-10 March 1764.
- Gentleman's Magazine*, 18, August 1748.
- Higgins, Padhraig. *A Nation of Politicians: Gender, Patriotism and Political Culture in Late Eighteenth-Century Ireland*. Madison WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010.
- Leerssen, Joep. *Mere Irish and Fíor-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, its Development and Literary Expression prior to the Nineteenth Century*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1996.
- O'Dowd, Mary. 'Politics, Patriotism, and Women in Ireland, Britain and Colonial America, c.1700-1780'. *Journal of Women's History* 22.4 (Winter 2010): 15-38.
- O'Dowd, Mary. 'Women and Patriotism in Eighteenth-Century Ireland'. *History Ireland* 14.5 (Sept-Oct 2006): 25-30.
- Ó Muirthe, Diarmaid. "'Tho' Not in Full Stile Compleat": Jacobite Songs from Gaelic Manuscript Sources'. *Eighteenth-Century Ireland: Iris an dá chultúr* VI (1991): 93-104.
- Quinn, David Beers. *The Elizabethans and the Irish*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1966.
- Ross, Robert. *Clothing: A Global History*. London: Polity, 2013 (Kindle edition).

- Smith, Chloe Wigston. *Women, Work, and Clothes in the Eighteenth-Century Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Swift, Jonathan. *The Complete Poems*. Ed. Pat Rogers. London: Penguin Books, 1983.
- Swift, Jonathan. 'A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture'. *The Works of Jonathan Swift, containing additional letters, tracts and poems, not hitherto published*, VII (Edinburgh: Constable, 1814).
- Whyte, Laurence. *The Collected Poems of Laurence Whyte*. Ed. Michael Griffin. Lewisberg PA: Bucknell University Press, 2016.
- Wilson, Rachel. *Elite Women in Ascendancy Ireland, 1690-1745*. Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2015.
- Winstanley, John. *Poems Written Occasionally by John Winstanley, Interspers'd with many Others, by Several Ingenious Hands*. Dublin: S. Powell, 1742.