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Greene's 'Quip for an Upstart Courtier', or Elizabethan England between Tradition and Novelty

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Abstract

The growth of a new wealthy middle-class in Tudor England brought about a great social confusion, which became evident through the inappropriate use of clothing and a particular interest in fashions from abroad. The confusion provoked by the excess of apparel turned to be a good topic for English priests who used it in their sermons to teach sobriety and modesty as the right measure of earthly life. The sin of extravagance in apparel became a favourite theme in Stubbes's *Anatomie of Abuses* and in many homilies and sermons throughout the 16th century. If preachers saw pride as the vice to be defeated, prose writers like Robert Greene used it as a good ironic weapon to describe Tudor society's covetousness and moral decline. In his *Quip for an Upstart Courtier* (1592), Greene deals with the "abuses that pride had bred in England" and denounces the lack of moral values in young men who had become of rank.

Keywords: Tudor Sumptuary Laws and Proclamations, Philp Stubbs *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583), Robert Greene *Quip for an Upstart Courtier* (1592), Tudor England.

Introduction

The accession of the Tudor dynasty to the English throne marked England's transition to the modern age and the confrontation with new challenges both in culture and politics. Religious turmoil, political uncertainty and the consequent social unrest challenged traditional structures and values to the point that the 16th century turned to be a troubled time for the English.¹ As Ai-

1. Warneke 1995: 881.

leen Ribeiro explains, with the accession of Henry VIII in 1509, England entered fully into the international spirit of the Renaissance. As far as clothing is concerned, the country opened up to the standards of luxury coming from abroad and forgot the dress style of old times.² The excess which accompanied the passing to new sartorial cuts did not go unnoticed and became a good topic to deal with in works of different kinds. Poets and preachers felt compelled to take a stand and did everything in their power to warn their readers against the excess in apparel. John Skelton, for example, denounced this phenomenon in a poem, *The Manner of the World Nowadays*,³ and put into evidence the deterioration of his countrymen's morals and manners. Around the same time, in 1508,⁴ Alexander Barclay translated *The Shyp of Folyys of the Worlde* from German. The poem, which sounded even more menacing than Skelton's, taught how men were easy prey for pride,⁵ their ambition for power and glory materializing in fashionable and new clothes in line with international fashion. Skelton's and Barclay's poems sadly prove how their contemporaries shared the idea that honest dress belonged to the past – now, they explain, the people “go full wantonly in dissolute array”⁶ and with no regard for proper manners and morality. A few years later, in 1516, Thomas More's *Utopia* described an

2. Ribeiro 2003: 59.

3. Skelton 1931: 144-150.

4. The original text, *Narrenschiff*, was written by Sebastian Brant in 1494 (see Ribeiro 2003: 59).

5. As Aileen Ribeiro explains, the poem “uses the idea of a ship of fools to discuss the worldliness and foolish customs of men, who are only too ready to be led astray by Superbia (Pride) which was begotten by Lucifer” (*ibidem*).

6. The text is available at this website: Barclay - The Shyp of folys in the world.pdf

ideal society where clothes were made of wool or linen with no distinctions of social rank. In More's ideal society "Among those who pursue false pleasure" are those who

think that the finer the gown they wear the better they are. On this point they are wrong twice over. They are no less deceived in thinking the gown is better than imagining they themselves are. For if you consider the usefulness of a garment, why is wool woven with fine thread better than wool woven with coarser thread? By they think they excel in fact, not merely in their illusions. They ruffle their feathers; they believe that they are more valuable because of their clothes. And on that basis, honors they would not have dared hope for inn cheaper clothes they demand as rightly due to their elegant gown, and they are outraged if someone passes them by without due deference.⁷

More's elegant and refined denunciation of excess of apparel among his contemporaries places the ethical question at the centre of the debate. More than ever, Henry VIII's lavish court and sophisticated fashion made clear the need for sobriety and measure, which convinced both State and Church to unite their efforts and prevent the terrible consequences of such dangerous excess. A campaign pivoting around sumptuary laws was introduced – its aim was not only to impose social order, but also to convey the idea that novelty and excess were a man's soul's worst enemies and had to be defeated by living a proper life in modesty and respect of tradition. Literature of course played its part. A lot of texts, in many cases anonymous, became the mouthpiece of moral teachings and hailed the virtues of a modest and sober life. *A Treatise of a Galaunt*, published in about 1522, is a case in point. This anonymous poem is a satirical attempt to depict and ridicule the manners of dandy courtiers whose pride, revealed

7. More 2014: 84-85.

through their obsession for foreign styles in dress, turns to be the bane of England.⁸

For many scholars of the time, the breakdown with the tradition was mostly due to the nature of the English themselves – they were an island people, negatively exposed to the ebb and flow of the tides, doomed to inconstancy and addicted to novelty.⁹ This idea, as explained by Sara Warneke, relies on popular medieval thought that attributed certain specific characteristics to different nationalities: Italians were subtle and treacherous, Spaniards were proud, Germans were drunkards and the English were inconstant, fascinated by novelty and ever ready to abandon old paths for new, unknown ones. In his *Polychronicon*, 14th-century chronicler Ranulph Higden explained that the people were highly curious to become acquainted with unfamiliar things and willing to view things differently.

The peple of Englonde is fulle curious to knowe straunge thynges by experience, depravenge theire awne thynges [they] commende other straunge, unnethe other never contente of the state of theire degre, trans-figurenge to theyme that is congruente to an other man.¹⁰

Higden's idea was taken up by Andrew Boorde in the early 1540s, including in his *Introduction of Knowledge*, where he makes fun of his fellow countrymen and their indecision about what to wear:

I am an English man, and naked I stand here,
Musyng in my mynde what rayment I shal were;
For now I wyll were thys, and now I wyl were that;
Now I wyl were I cannot tel what.

8. The anonymous text is available in a book edited by J.O. Halliwell in 1860.

9. *Ibidem*.

10. Higden 1869: 169-171.

All new fashions be plesaunt to me;
I wyl haue them, whether I thryue or thee.¹¹

As Warneke explains,

From the mid-sixteenth century the characterization of the inconstant Englishman, corrupted by the lure of novelties and newfangledness, quickly became a standard image, increasingly used by English authors to explain the changes around them. Moralists criticized courtiers for their new-fangled fashions, and both state and church attacked the lower orders for adopting novelties in social and political behaviour.¹²

The new rich were determined to enforce their status and saw in clothing the easiest way to satisfy their wish.

The concern of this essay is to show how newfangledness and foreign fashion affected late 16th-century England to the point that both Crown and Church felt the need for laws to preserve the social order and impose a good moral conduct. These pages also mean to see how popular authors like Robert Greene openly expressed their opinions in their works and criticized a world that was prey of ambition and social affirmation.

Fashion and Pride: Stubbes's *Anatomy of Abuses* and Tudor Sumptuary Laws

In late 16th-century England, a wave of *nouveau riche* invaded the social scene bringing about confusion and disorder. Emulation, as Alan Hunt explains, is the strategy “by which people lower in the social hierarchy attempt to realize their aspirations towards higher status by modifying their behaviour, their dress and the kinds of good they purchase”.¹³ Fashion and clothes proved to be the spheres where the consequences of

11. Furnivall 1870: 116.

12. Warneke 1995: 883.

13. Hunt 1996: 25.

this phenomenon were most evident. Clothes made the man and spoke of his social standing: special and rich fabrics and colours, once the exclusive preserve of the aristocracy, started to be worn disrespectfully by a host of parvenus, who lacked the necessary social background and, in many cases, the money to maintain a high lifestyle. The homilies and laws of the time were particularly concerned with the consequences of this practice. They focused on encouraging people live a sober and virtuous life. In a late-16th-century homily, the preacher tried to teach those assembled to behave properly and avoid excess in their apparel, “at these days so gorgeous, that neither Almighty God by his word can stay our proud curiosity in the same”.¹⁴ The priest who preached this homily must have been sincerely distressed at his countrymen’s obstinacy in wanting to show off luxurious clothes and in ignoring that “all may not look to wear like apparel, but every one according to his degree, as God hath placed him”.¹⁵ Despite the reprimands from the pulpits, however, the English continued to ignore the serious risk they were taking and had “no regard to the degree wherein God hath placed them”.¹⁶

Concern for the English souls was expressed in all the churches of the kingdom. As Roze Hentschell remarks, sermons were “particularly crucial for understanding the ways in which early modern authors conceptualized English obsession with apparel”¹⁷ and show how religious discourse could shape secular texts. Philip Stubbes’s *Anatomie of Abuses*, first published in 1583, is a case in point. Stubbes’s was in fact one of the most pow-

14. *Certain Sermons* 1852: 282.

15. *Ivi*: 284.

16. *Ibidem*.

17. Hentschell 2009: 572.

erful voices denouncing the chaos and the moral depravity of his time. Concerned with how the sin of pride had crept in among his countrymen, Stubbes devoted a good part of his work to examining this terrible sin, giving special attention to ‘the pride of the apparel’. This preoccupation with sumptuous attire is, in Stubbes’s opinion, synonymous with unnaturalness: “newe fangled fashions, dooe they not rather deforme, then adorne us: disguise us then become us: Making us rather, to resemble savage Beastes, and stearne monsters”.¹⁸ While conversing with Spudeus, a county yokel, Philoponus, who takes the part of Stubbes’s voice in the text, explains that clothing was “given us of God to cover our shame, to keep our bodies from cold, to be as pricks in our eyes, to put us in minde of our miseries”.¹⁹ In line with the preachers of his time, Stubbes is opposed to the effects that sumptuous attire has on the people and denounces the social confusion spreading throughout England:

There is suche a confuse mingle mangle of apparell in England, and such horrible excesse thereof, as euery one is permitted to flaunt it out, in what apparell he listeth himselfe, or can get by any meanes. So that it is very hard to knowe, who is noble, who is worshipfull, who is a Gentleman, who is not.²⁰

The effort made by preachers was supported and completed by Parliament and governors. To avoid social confusion and disorder, sumptuary laws were introduced in Medieval Europe to regulate luxury and food, proving to be a guide for social order with respect to hierarchy.²¹ Their aim was to govern appear-

18. Stubbes 1583: 8.

19. Ivi: 12.

20. Ivi: 10.

21. Harte 1976: 134.

ance, allowing “social events [...] to be read from the visible signs disclosed by the clothes of the wearer”²²

As Elizabeth Baldwin explains, the first English sumptuary laws appeared during king Edward III’s reign.²³ They gradually became “the most vehement and committed attempts to control how the population dressed”.²⁴ Henry VIII was the first Tudor to accord particular relevance to the matter. All his legislative acts governing apparel, Maria Hayward explains, “reveal a growing concern with emphasizing the increasingly subtle definitions of rank within the nobility and gentry”.²⁵ Henry VIII’s laws on apparel reveal how wearing costly attire was regarded as a cause of poverty and an occasion for crime. For these reasons excess had to be controlled and recidivists punished. Henry’s approach to the matter was maintained throughout his reign as well as by his successors. The law he passed in 1533 remained the point of reference for the subsequent Tudor monarchs.²⁶ Among these, Elizabeth I passed a considerable number of proclamations, the first being published in 1559, which respected the measures taken by her father in 1533. However, in the subsequent years of her reign, her proclamations changed in structure and tone. They were no longer negative or prohibitive in character, but simply established what the people had to do and wear. In 1597, exas-

22. Hunt 1996: 42.

23. Baldwin 1923: 1.

24. Vincent 2002: 31.

25. Hayward 2016: 18.

26. *Certain Sermons* 1852: 282. No sumptuary laws were passed during the reign of Edward VI. Under the reign of Mary, no legislation on apparel was enacted: she confirmed, in fact, the law her father’s Parliament had passed in 1533 (see Baldwin 1923: 230 and 236-247).

perated by infractions, Elizabeth passed another proclamation with the clear intention of stopping and punishing the inordinate excess in apparel that was causing disturbances across the realm:

Whereas the Queen's majestie, for avoiding of the great inconvenience that hath grown and daily doth increase within this her realm by the inordinate excess in apparel, hath in her princely wisdom and care for reformation thereof by sundry former proclamations straightly charged and commanded those in authority under her to see her laws provided in that behalf duly executed.²⁷

The increase in crime brought about by pride and social ambition was irrefutable evidence of the unhealthy state of her subjects. The Queen's concern at the lack of respect shown towards both laws and order, and the evident disrespect for social hierarchy was widely shared by her governors as well as her people. In such a situation, literature played its part by echoing the words of the Queen's voice and popular authors became spokesmen of the law.

Robert Greene's *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier*

Robert Greene's *A Quip for an Upstart Courtier* provides a perfect example of this. It first entered the Stationer's Register on July 21, 1592, and immediately proved a bestseller with some twenty reprints between 1592 and 1635.²⁸ The most reliable edition, however, is the last, that of 1635, published by Elizabeth Purslowe, who was somehow related to George Purslowe,

27. Hughes and Larkin 1969: 174.

28. The 2010 edition of Greene's text mentioned in the Bibliography section is the only one used throughout this essay. The pages in brackets after any quotation from Greene's *Quip* refer to this edition (p. 5).

a London printer.²⁹ When the pamphlet came out, Robert Greene was already tremendously popular. This work was such a success that it was read not only by his loyal audience, which was familiar with his texts on ‘cony-catching’, but also by a part of the English aristocracy. The reason for this success lay in the pamphlet topic, which bridged the English wish for novelty and the lack of morality. The text concerns a trial between two pairs of anthropomorphised, allegorical breeches. It deals with the class-related and economic issues associated with the *nouveau riche* and the gentry, who had imposed themselves on the social scene of the time. The metaphorical meaning of the text is already made explicit in the title, where the words *Quip* and *Upstart Courtier* clearly announce mockery of a specific social class. To begin, *Quip* reveals both the tone and the *genre* of the text: “a sharp, sarcastic, or cutting remark”.³⁰ Greene is in fact addressing his readers to convey a clear message of denunciation of the behaviour of these parvenus. Then *upstart Courtier* adds the missing information to complete the whole. Greene’s targets are the upstart men attending the English Court and behaving as if they are descended from great noble households, being snobbish and absurdly arrogant.

In his address to Thomas Barnaby Esquire, chosen for being “a supporter of ancient hospitality, an enemy to pride”, and “a maintainer of cloth breeches (I mean of the old and worthy

29. George Purslowe was active as a printer between 1614 and 1632 (see: Sayle 2010: 869). Elizabeth Purslowe was a prolific printer whose activity ended in about 1646 (see the webpage devoted to her by Gollen and Caius College, Cambridge: <https://www.cai.cam.ac.uk/discover/library/online-exhibitions/her-book/printers/elizabeth-purslowe-1646>).

30. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*: <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/156736?rskey=ulwxQj&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>

customs of the gentility and yeomanry of England)” (p. 23), Robert Greene explains that the dispute between his characters puts into evidence

the abuses that pride had bred in England, how it had infected the Court with aspiring envy, the city with griping covetousness, and the country with contempt and disdain: how since men placed their delights in proud looks, and brave attire, hospitality was left off, neighbourhood was exiled, conscience was scoffed at, and charity lay frozen in the streets (p. 24).

Greene manages to conceal the seriousness of his concern about pride in apparel by informing the readers that his work is based on a dream, that the debate between the characters has never taken place and that the characters themselves are nothing but the product of his sleeping mind. Yet, as much as now, Greene’s statement must have sounded like an invitation to understand precisely the opposite: his dream is the ironical metaphor of reality and his fears in the dream are none other than the real concern he feels about the situation. Greene’s readers would have been aware of his sarcasm and insolent tone and would have been entertained by this story which promises to be a joke from the first page.

The beginning of the text introduces Robert Greene as the first-person omniscient narrator of the story, who plays the role of a judge in the debate which will be described throughout the whole text. Much indebted to the dream-vision poems of the Medieval literary tradition, the text is based on a vision the author had during a dream. He is out in the open air at an undefined time of the year when, after falling asleep, he finds himself in a vale carpeted with sweet and colourful flowers. In line with the Medieval tradition, these flowers are introduced to the reader and their symbolic meaning is re-

vealed and explained: for example, fennel symbolizes flattery; thyme represents quick and short-lasting changes, especially related to social status; rue means sorrow and repentance; daisies signify inconstancy; and lavender embodies loyalty:³¹ besides revealing Greene's botanical knowledge, this long list of herbs and flowers aims to introduce the reader to a setting in which everything takes on a symbolic and metaphorical meaning. It is no coincidence, in fact, if the items cited embody virtues and vices, and are used as an introduction to the clash between the great values of British tradition and the serious vices of the upstarts Greene strongly criticizes in his text. Tradition and novelty are implicitly introduced into the narration and into the reader's mind, whose interest in the story is fueled by a beginning that sounds most promising and entertaining. Greene's text proves thus to be in keeping with its time by teaching his readers the importance of tradition and the dangers of the new, while by providing edifying examples, he teaches his readers to distinguish a good and honest person from negative social models. When the story begins, Greene's readers are put in the right frame of mind to be entertained and taught an important lesson about their moral conduct.

The debate announced in the first pages of the story starts to develop when, following the description of the setting, our narrator is seen strolling in the vale. His attention is caught by some people talking animatedly. He smiles at them but then, as happens only in dreams, in the blink of an eye he is suddenly alone. He was walking around, in search of company, when he

31. Information on the symbolism of the flowers and plants mentioned above is given by Greene himself (pp. 25-29).

saw “An uncouth headless thing come pacing down the hill, stepping so proudly with such a geometrical grace” (p. 29) that immediately caught his attention. Of course, he could not “de-scry is to be a man, although it had motion, for that it wanted a body” (p. 29),³² and yet, since it had both legs and hose, he judged it to be a monster. This frightening creature turned to be a costly pair of velvet breeches,

whose panes, being made of the chiefest Neapolitan stuff, was drawn out with the best Spanish satin, and marvellous curiously over-whipped with gold twist inter-seamed with knots of pearl: the netherstock was of the purest Granado silk; no cost was spared to set out these costly breeches, who had girt unto them a rapier and dagger gilt, point pendant, as quaintly as if some curious Florentine had tricked them up to square it up and down the streets before his mistress (p. 30).

These breeches were cut following the fashion of the time and made precious by elements imported from abroad. Their exclusiveness was determined by their being the costly product of a mixture of fashions and fabrics coming from abroad, especially Italy and Spain, and not from England. Greene uses these breeches to introduce the figure of the upstart courtier, bold and pretentious, entering the scene as if he were the master of the world:

As these breeches were exceeding sumptuous to the eye, so were they passing pompous in their gestures, for they strutted up and down the valley as proudly as though they had there appointed to act some desperate combat (p. 30).

The boldness of this monstrous character takes on meaning when compared to his opposite: another pair of breeches marching more soberly, typical of England’s ancient days:

32. *Ibidem*.

I might perceive from the top of the other hill another pair of breeches more soberly marching, [...]. I saw they were a plain pair of cloth breeches without either welt or guard, straight to the thigh, of white kersey, without a slop, the netherstock of the same, sewed to above the knee, and only seamed with a little country blue such as in *diebus illis* our great-grandfathers wore when neighbourhood and hospitality had banished pride out of England (p. 30).

The second pair of breeches the narrator meets is thus made of plain cloth and stands for English tradition. Both gait and attitude reveal a sober creature in simple clothes made with English fabrics.

As far as the narrator can see, the conflict between these characters is inevitable, the former's pride and the latter's homely resolution being clear and manifest. Velvet-breeches was in fact addressing Cloth-breeches and saying he was a proud and insolent peasant, while Cloth-breeches was defending himself by saying that he belonged to "the old ancient yeomanry, yea, and gentility" (p. 31) and accusing his interlocutor of being part instead of "a company of proud and unmannerly upstarts" (p. 31). The narrator is so intrigued by the situation that he decides to call a trial to resolve the matter. Both Velvet and Cloth set out their reasons for pleading their cause: the former relying on the importance of being a *nouveau riche* flaunting his wealth through the ostentation of luxurious and expensive clothing made from imported fabrics; the latter relying on the strength of English tradition and the sobriety of a national identity identifiable in the English fabric of his clothes. In Greene's hands, Velvet and Cloth are the metaphorical embodiments of the English society of the time. In their appearance and in their words the readers can recognize the social concern at the excessive interest in foreign clothing, to the detriment

of the local and national economy. The large number of fabrics from abroad had jeopardised the English woollen mills' work and plunged many families into poverty. The English economy was dangerously affected by this phenomenon, and the English society, already tried by famines and plagues, was sinking into an abyss of poverty. The sumptuary laws introduced by the Queen's Privy Council were thus meant not only to encourage people to choose home-produced fabrics, but also to limit the numbers of the poor and, consequently, of criminals.

The quarrel between Greene's two characters relies on their belief in each being the best expression of the Britishness of the time and, consequently, they feel the legitimate recipients of their countrymen's honour and respect. The entire dispute can be resolved by finding an answer to an apparently simple question: who deserves more honour between the two? Starting from the premise that "cucullus nun facit monachum, nor a velvet makes a sloven a gentleman" (pp. 32-33), Cloth-breeches claims that when it comes to the use they were appointed to, his honour is greater than his antagonist's for he "belongs to the old ancient yeomanry" (p. 34).

The terms of the quarrel being set, a jury has to be formed and summoned in order to conduct the process and decide who is right. The choice of the jury is based on the categories of people our characters meet in the vale and on their opinion of them. The text evolves thus from a quarrel to a debate between Velvet and Cloth on how honest and loyal to English laws these categories are. Elizabethan Society is represented by two opposite points of view: one in favour of wealth and corruption, the other in favour of honest work and proper conduct. By doing this, Greene helps his readers to realize how the En-

English world has changed dramatically following the introduction of foreign goods into the country's market. Both Velvet and Cloth are involved in choosing the jury members and their clashing personalities are once more evidenced by what they say concerning the persons they meet. Cloth-breeches' comments relate to his concern about the quality of the jury. His judgments leave no doubt as to how he fears the changes English society has undergone in recent times. He is the voice of traditional England and of the moral teaching preached from the pulpits and by the laws in force. He is convinced that everyone should be dressed following their social rank and so "let noblemen go as their births require, and gentlemen as they are born" (p. 36). Like most of his country fellows, Cloth-breeches does not look favourably on the fabrics and fashions imported from abroad, supporting a more conscious consumption of English products. His words align with the government's policy of incentivizing the consumption of home-produced items to protect the national economic system and help the English workers. The choice to follow foreign fashions and wear clothes made from non-English fabrics corresponds to an excess which means to commit a sin of pride: "all men of worth are taught by reading, that excess is a great sin: that pride is the first step to the downfall of shame" (p. 36). Cloth-breeches' reasoning is based thus on the idea that pride has banished conscience and that "Now every lout must have his son a court-noll: and those dunghill drudges wax so proud, that they will presume to wear on their feet, what kings have worn on their heads" (p. 40). The world has turned upside down: social roles are no longer respected, appearance has gained the upper hand over morality and no good can come out of such a situation.

It is for this reason that Cloth-breeches rejects most of the people he meets in the vale, his selection being based in fact on the people's honesty and their respect for the social rules: the tailor, for example, cannot be a good judge: he has made money dishonestly. He is now wearing rich clothes and behaving like a gentleman. The tailor is, in fact, an upstart who became rich by exploiting the works of others. Lawyers are not welcome either: the arrival of upstarts utterly changed them and, having been honest and simple men devoted to helping the poor, they have become proud and covetous, always searching for money and glory.

At the end of the pamphlet, Cloth-breeches, Greene's voice in the text, approves a jury whose members have kept faith with tradition and authentically reflect England and her traditions. The knight is a case in point. He is welcomed by Cloth-breeches, but was refused by Velvet-breeches because "he regarded hospitality [...] he is content in homespun cloth, and scorns the pride that is used nowadays amongst young upstarts" (p. 57). This knight is so virtuous that he clashes with the arrogant and presumptuous nature of the speaker, whose words prove his covetousness and greed are irreconcilable with the human and moral values of traditionalist England. Directed by Greene's pen, our contenders' choices explain to readers the distinction between Good and Evil, and help them choose which side to stand. The workers chosen as jury members belong to categories that have been exploited by others and are given no opportunity to improve their social condition. Curiously enough, the last person to be accepted is the poet: one who "is born to make the tavern rich and himself a beggar. [...] I think him an honest man, if he would but live within his compass, and generally no

man's foe but his own, therefore I hold him a man fit to be of my jury" (p. 71). A poet himself, Greene could not exclude his own category from the worthiest in England and, though he says they are drunkards and loafers, he does not question their honesty. Greene's category stands thus with Cloth-breeches and condemns the excesses in apparel and pride.

After much discussion between the two pairs of breeches, the trial eventually concludes with the verdict given in favour of Cloth-breeches. The fact that he is as old as England and has always been the honest voice of his country's people and traditions, has given him the upper hand over his antagonist and what he represents. Velvet-breeches is said to be, in fact, a proud upstart and an enemy in the English economy:

Cloth-breeches is by many hundred years more ancient, ever since Bruce an Inhabitant of this island, and that he hath been in *diebus illis*, a companion to kings, an equal with the nobility, a friend to gentlemen, and yeoman, and a patron of the poor, a true subject, a good house-keeper, and generally as honest as he is ancient: whereas Velvet-breeches is an upstart come out of Italy, begot of pride, nursed up by self-love, and brought into this country by his companion newfangledness [...] therefore in general verdict we adjudge Cloth-breeches to have done him no wrong, but that he hath lawfully claimed his title of frank tenement, and in that we appoint him forever to be resident (p. 72).

Cloth-breeches wins the day because he embodies all the English traditional values and fights against novelty and the harmful effects of ambition.

Conclusion

Greene's pamphlet is clear evidence of how literature played an important role among the people: it was expected to deal with the great issues of the time, to convey ideas and beliefs, to connect

the people with the authorities. In full respect of the binomial 'teach and delight', literature turned to be a useful and efficacious means of communication which, thanks to different *genres* and registers, reached all social strata, from the elite to the poorest. For example, John Donne's satires of the 1590s attack the fops at court who rate their own importance by the richness of their attire. More or less in the same period, John Marston's *The Scourge of Villainy* laughs at the gallants in martial poses, while Thomas Dekker's *The Gull's Hornbook* satirizes English gulls by claiming to teach them how to behave properly in society. Satire and jokes a part, moderation became the key word in this period while, as Thomas Elyot wrote in *The Governor* (1531), taking up quick changes in fashion would be a mark of dissolute manners.

All these texts move from the premise that, as Aileen Ribeiro explains, "the upper ranks of society, and especially the court, were widely believed in the last decades of the sixteenth century to be both frivolous and vain".³³ Paradoxically, the class that was damaging England was also the one that had the power to save it. Of all the texts considered, Roger Ascham's *The Scholemaster* (1570) was the only one to teach that the situation could be saved only if good examples were made at the top of society, namely the Court. Except for the Queen, who was admired for her extraordinarily rich and various wardrobe, the rest of the court was expected to set a good example and prevent the rest of the population from falling victim to pride and immoderate ambition. But this never happened and the sumptuary laws signed by the Queen turned out to be rather useless and unconvincing. None of the social categories involved, from the magistrates down to the sheriffs, was able to enforce com-

33. Ribeiro 2003: 68.

pliance with these laws and no one was able to see those who didn't respect them adequately punished: Elizabeth's subjects had already understood that apparel was a serious matter related to the expression of the self rather than of a social class. However, as it has been explained in these pages, literature played its part and Greene's *Quip* was just a voice among many. The moral teaching contained in his pamphlet is clear evidence of Greene's unconditioned love and respect for his home country and what is English. Anarchy in costume and fashion leads the way to a sinful society and for this reason it must be stopped. Greene's text is indeed a warning against the abuse of all things newfangled and their terrible consequences. It speaks straight to the people's mind and helps them realize how peril is subtle and close at hand. His simple and informal language, easily understood by a wide range of readers, gives his text an efficacy superior to that of a sermon heard in church. Ironic as it is, Greene's pamphlet must have been highly regarded by Elizabethan audiences who were expected to reflect upon a grave matter. The number of editions Greene's text had is clear evidence of how well it was received by readers. Nevertheless, the success this work had does not provide sufficient evidence to say whether it had positive effects on English fashion. Greene's confidence in the sumptuary system of his country was not enough, either. As Baldwin explains, sumptuary laws soon proved to be a failure and were repealed early in James I's reign.³⁴ What is certain is the relevance of the matter in literature where fashion and all its problems are an essential piece of the jigsaw to complete and understand the extraordinary complexity of the Tudor Age.

34. Baldwin 1923: 316.

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