

Eighteenth-Century Dress and the Arts of Measure

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This paper examines the worlds of the unapologetically human scale of clothing measurement during the eighteenth century, especially in Britain, at a moment when tailored clothing was the norm for all social classes.¹ Perhaps no social practice of measure was as widely encountered in such richly embodied ways; and both because of the very ubiquity of dress and the intense scrutiny of specific bodily sites that fashion demanded, even the merest fractions of an inch made for especially dramatic impacts upon sensory experience. In the first part of the paper, I explore two emblematic literary examples where the metrical subconscious of tailoring, in its distinctness from other domains and practices of measure, comes briefly to the surface: William Wordsworth's "The Thorn" (with its insistent measurement of the dimensions of an almost "bespoke," body-sized natural grave) and Walter Scott's *Waverley* (with its opening, surveyor's view of unproductive, patchwork Scottish agriculture as a "tailor's book of patterns" and its central dilation on the English protagonist's fitting session with a Highland clan's "hereditary tailor" James the Needle). In the second part of the paper, I focus especially on the last years of the eighteenth century and the more immersive vision of the *Taylor's Complete Guide*, published in London in 1796. Written on the cusp of the succeeding nineteenth-century regime of universal measurement (where ells and *aunes* became inches and centimeters, and where one-off "analog" construction gave way to tape measures, standardized sizing, and mass production²), the *Taylor's Complete Guide* self-consciously presents itself as a repository of the "different maxims of measure and making" that lie at the heart of the craft of tailoring.

While the *Taylor's Complete Guide* thoroughly outlines a praxis for an embodied regime of measurement, it also explicitly aspires toward a "theory" and "system" of the same, one that occasionally, wryly approaches the level of metaphysics.³ As the authors (a "Society of Adepts in the Profession") note, in a variation on a theme repeated throughout the text, "We write for the general good, and are conscious of meeting success in the minds and sentiments of the truly liberal" (46). Their ultimate aim is that "all the world may be improved, and human nature receive its pristine Grace and Elegance" (4)—

¹As John Styles notes, "Because personal identity and reputation were so tied up with the way clothes looked, even poor people expected to have their outer garments made up by professionals. As a result, replacing those garments required commercial transactions not just to acquire fabric, but also to have it cut out and assembled by tailors and mantuamakers" (322).

²As a unit of measure, the "ell" did have reference to a reasonably objective standard. The brass standard ell kept by the Exchequer in London supposedly dated to Elizabethan times. But this measure widely varied in practice and was not codified in law. Moreover, as a unit of measurement specifically applicable to dress, the "ell" applied to the length of cloth purchased rather than to the specific measurements taken for fitting dress to a body.

³In part, this practice-centered, eighteenth-century discourse of measurement paints in a new light the more familiar, quasi-satirical mode of fashion metaphysics (emblemized by Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* but extending through the writings of Edward Bulwer Lytton, Honoré de Balzac, Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Walter Benjamin in the long nineteenth century).

with the added suggestion that dress has an especially important role to play in the elevation of “human nature” in being directly seated upon, and socially inseparable from, the human frame. In line with this liberal project, the *Guide* abounds in playful touches of broader appeal—from the Shandean titles of chapters like the “Dissertation on Coats” and the “Theory and Practice of Breeches” to the many amusing anecdotes of bad tailoring gone wrong.

Crucially, as these relatively clear examples of sartorial error begin to suggest, the “general good” the *Guide* aims to do will be visible not just to the specialized, technical eye of the craftsman but to everyone—especially because, in the special case of dress, everyone has the requisite experience of constant judgement. And to take the *Guide* at its word, it has as its ultimate object the refinement of this common capacity for visual attention to dress. For in contrast to poor practitioners of the art, the skilled tailor produces or proliferates elegant object-driven “Incidents” that can “facilitate” the fuller development of an “Eye” that has “its correspondence in all that is just and beautiful”—one that will eventually be possessed enough of “habitual nicety” to “discriminate” at a glance between genuine “Grace” and “extravagant whimsies” (5).

As a practical document, the *Guide* is of course preoccupied with bodily measurement, and moreover comes into being at precisely the moment when an old and longstanding order of measurement in dress began to be eclipsed. For most of the eighteenth century, as Clare Haru Crowston notes, “No standard measuring device existed for measuring bodies [...]. Lacking a tape measure marked in inches or centimeters, the seamstress or tailor used a long strip of paper” (specifically denominated a “measure”) in its place. Each of the measurements a tailor required to make a garment would be marked in notches on the strip of paper “with a cut of the scissors” (147). And by making one such “measure” for each customer, tailors could keep on hand a ready, precise record for use in producing new clothing—one that required no other point of reference than the client’s own body. The foremost sign of the new regime in dress, the adoption around 1800 of the modern tape measure (i.e., one ruled in standardized units of inches or centimeters⁴) soon ushered in a paradigm shift in the ontology of measurement that radically decentered the physically present body. But during the eighteenth century, an allowance for individual variation—even as a means of aspiring to the latest fashionable norm of a silhouette—remained both an ordinary entitlement and a particular kind of knowledge carried in the hand and eye of the experienced tailor.⁵

⁴ However abstract and imprecise in practice, the first physical reference point of the meter as a unit of measure (fixed in France in 1793 as one ten-millionth of a quadrant of the earth’s circumference running through Paris from the North Pole to the equator) raises its own set of fascinating questions for our own ecological moment by meting human bodies in fractions of a planetary body.

⁵ With particular attunement to the nineteenth-century context of sartorial measurement, Alison Matthews David emphasizes how the medicalization of bodily variation as “abnormality” interfered with the capacity of eighteenth-century tailors (or observers like de Garsault) simply to take bodily “quirks” or “flaws” “in [...] stride” as part of the inevitable continuum of variation in bodies (142, 146). As reconceived in light of the new regime of statistical analysis of social life, nineteenth-century tailoring increasingly functioned as a thoroughly mathematical, “geometric exercise” that viewed the human body as a “conjunction of parallelograms, double curvatures, and points on a graph. The garment [the nineteenth-century tailor] constructs for this fictive person is equally abstracted, and cloth is conceived of as a planar surface upon which he performs

In works like the *Guide* and Françoise-Alexandre de Garsault's *Art du Tailleur* (1769) (from which the *Encyclopédie* borrowed heavily), this more robustly embodied sense of measurement was explicitly juxtaposed to what could be tracked in a simple, linear fashion, even by the customized paper "measures." Yet despite all the ways in which the *Guide* preserves length itself as an elastic quality, as a specific event in the history of measurement, the *Guide* does not entirely escape the newer regime of standardized units. Although the starting point for measurement remains the body itself, standardized units of measure intervene as a language of adjustment for these more direct bodily measurements. Often this applies to the extra cloth that extends just beyond the initial, non-standardized measurement of the body's dimensions—the extra allowance ("one inch" broader across the shoulders, "two inches" longer in the back, a "full inch" more in the neck) needed to give the body room to move or to receive the elegant supplementation of natural form that well-draped fabric accomplishes. Like the historical bodies that wear it, then, the cut cloth addressed by the *Guide* sits between these two regimes of measure; and in this liminal textile space of metrical adjustment, these regimes come into direct contact.

Because of the precision with which dress was made, experienced, and observed in the eighteenth century, this specific legacy of measurement also persisted well into the twentieth century—most notably as a privileged realm for quantitative fantasy licensed by the exceptionally complete evidentiary trail of small changes of dress across time. The millimeter by millimeter rise and fall of décolletage, waist width, skirt length, etc. featured prominently within the early stirrings of the quantitative social sciences—most systematically in Jane Richardson and Alfred L. Kroeber's "Three Centuries of Women's Dress Fashions: A Quantitative Analysis" (1940), which tracked the remarkable regularity of cycles of fashion by measuring clothing depicted in fashion illustrations from the late-eighteenth to the early-twentieth century. This same measurement (and re-measurement) of dress went on to shape the unfolding and eclipse of structuralist thought in the twentieth-century academy, most notably via the work of Roland Barthes in *The Fashion System* and his other writings on dress, for whom Richardson and Kroeber's study was especially significant. But the eighteenth-century art of tailoring, however dependent upon its own precise practices of measure, also demanded great flexibility with constantly varying materials and great skill in meeting the moving target of a vast variety of body types, postures, and paths of motion in the world—which makes this socially deterministic, quantitative twentieth century afterlife a somewhat ironic legacy.

Already, the *Guide* itself caught a prophetic glimpse of this kind of quantitative vision. "What will future workmen say," the *Guide* wonders, "when we declare the difference and quick transition of fashion [...] between 1793, when we were wont to cut waists full nine inches long from under the arm down to the hip [...], and in the year 1796 we have been obliged to cut them but three inches in the same place for the length, to figures of the same height and stature?" (110). Here, a metrical sense of the rhythms of change in dress, verging on an annualized retracing of the "variegated" steps of the cyclical rise and fall of waistlines, comes particularly into view for the art of tailoring's material practi-

similarly geometrical calculations" (148). Matthews David further outlines the numerous, hyper-technological instruments of bodily measurement developed over the course of the nineteenth century, such as Christian Beck's *costumomètre* in 1816 and F.A. Barde's *anthropomètre* (or "man-meter") in 1834 (148, 147).

tioners.⁶ Richardson and Kroeber themselves refuse to commit to anything but the arbitrariness of dress as a subject, finally selected not “because of any special importance or interest which it may possess in itself” but because “it provides a convenient and promising set of data for a study of the problem of how stylistic or aesthetic changes prove to take place” (111). By way of the *Guide* and other texts, though, I suggest throughout this paper that dress has very often “promised” in precisely this way: even in the late eighteenth century, dress already put the problem of cultural metrics writ large under a magnifying glass. Ultimately, I turn to the fuller sense of the practice of measure outlined in these texts to explore the resources eighteenth-century work upon dress materials (visual, textual, and material) can offer in response to the renewed quantitative excess of our own digital-human intellectual moment—as a theory immersed in measurement itself as art.

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⁶ The formulation in the *Guide* is fairly sophisticated in the way it tracks cycles of fashion that go to extremes before reverting to a mean: “By Fashions our fancies are constantly amused, by the brilliancy of every newly engendered Improvement, and our Minds become respondent for every Change,—in this gradation our understandings are passive till we arrive at the very summit of Excess, and having there regaled ourselves upon the very top, and *apex* of our fancies, we grow tired with the sameness of the Scene, ’till the fluctuating Goddess [of Fashion] takes a retrospective view of the variegated steps by which she ascended; she then modestly returns to the medium from which we started, nearly by the same progression, and when we are seated there [...], we are still unsatisfied; the Mind is not at Ease, still Fancy leads us by the same meanders, till we are seduced [*sic*] to the opposite extreme” (6-7).

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