MATTHAUS SCHWARZ’S COSTUME BOOK AND GENDER PERFORMATIVITY

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the concept of gender in early modern Europe. A critical debate amongst gender theorists is whether gender is constructed or performed, and historians must carefully consider which lens to apply to primary sources. Using Matthaus Schwarz’s sixteenth century “costume book”, a series of 137 private portraits that document Schwarz’s outfits throughout his life, as a window to masculinity, I argue the only way to explain and understand both the book’s existence and contents is to apply the lens of gender as performed. With Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity as a framework, this paper examines Schwarz’s performance of masculinity through his clothes. This paper also explores how Butler’s theory offers an explanation for the book’s creation and thus better understanding of Schwarz’s gender insecurities; Schwarz sought to “check” his appearance to ensure his performance was successful, and he recorded his outfits with lessened frequency as he became more secure in his ability to display masculinity.
The Costume Book

In 1520, on his twenty-third birthday, Augsburg merchant Matthaus Schwarz began an unusual book of artwork, carefully chronicling the expensive, colorful, skillfully-made outfits he wore to parties, weddings, and on a casual day. Eventually, he would commission 137 small paintings noting outfits from his childhood until his death, the bulk of the paintings focusing on his appearance as a young man.¹ This artifact, unique for its contents, can reveal to historians more than fashion trends in early modern Europe. It is highly intimate, and by considering the existence of the book as a personal artifact, we can learn crucial details about gender itself.

Ulinka Rublack, a historian who spent considerable time analyzing and studying Schwarz’s costume book, argues in her book *Dressing Up: Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe* that the book reveals deeply personal and intimate pieces of Schwarz’s life.² Schwarz used the book privately and selectively showed it to others, indicating Schwarz’s likenesses in the book aren’t highly controlled and planned. As Schwarz frequently notes in the captions, the images were meant to accurately reflect how Schwarz looked. He even expressed interest in tracking his appearance over time, and the narrative created in the book affirms that intention. Schwarz’s idea of his appearance and identity is certainly rooted in time, as he includes a set of pictures depicting his childhood milestones and carefully documents his birthdays. The book follows nearly Schwarz’s entire life, ending about a year before his death, and Rublack interprets the lower frequency of pictures toward the end of the book to mean Schwarz was uncomfortable with aging and felt increasingly out of control with his appearance.³

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Schwarz’s book is primarily meant for private expression. The clear focus of each portrait is himself, as the backgrounds are minimalist and plain. Unlike in traditional portraits, the backgrounds in Schwarz’s costume book contain no symbolism or hidden messages. They instead serve to “set the scene” for each outfit, containing just enough detail to remind Schwarz of his environment at the time, be it outdoors, inside, a city, or a dance house. Some portraits offer multiple angles to approach the same Schwarz outfit, but these primarily serve to give Schwarz a complete view of his appearance, not to project or inflate Schwarz’s status. The two naked portraits are clear evidence of the attempt at accuracy Schwarz made. He was unhappy with his “fat” figure, yet kept the image and didn’t have it altered. This reveals he would have rather had the truth than contribute to a sense that he couldn’t trust his own perceptions. While one might think Schwarz used the naked image to influence his future outfits, perhaps to hide his figure, there appears to be no stylistic change in portraits before and after the nude one.

Schwarz had enough other media to create a desired, carefully designed image of himself, such as medals, grand portraits, and especially his clothes, that he wouldn’t have needed to express self-fashioning in a private, more simply-constructed costume book. Instead, the costume book was personal, a way for Schwarz to see and document his masculinity.

However, a man of his status would have access to mirrors. Schwarz could have simply looked at his own appearance for confirmation of masculinity. The fact that he went to such trouble as to commission portraits to objectively represent him indicates Schwarz needed an outside opinion. He didn’t trust his perception of his performance. In order to truly understand if he was sufficiently performing masculinity, Schwarz needed to see himself through a third party’s eyes and record each outfit, as if to scrutinize the successes and failures of each

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4 Schwarz, First Book of Fashion, ed. Rublack, Hayward, p. 141.
5 Rublack, Dressing Up, p. 35.
performance. Schwarz used the costume book to gauge how his gender performance was perceived and if it accomplished the level of masculinity he sought. The lower frequency of portraits toward the end of the costume book is not explained by a higher anxiety of aging and a loss of control, as Rublack claims, but is a reflection of Schwarz’s increased security in his performances. As he grew confident in his ability to perform masculinity, he needed the costume book less in order to gauge or accept it.

This essay will examine the aspects of masculinity Schwarz sought to display and his degree of success in displaying them. As Schwarz’s costume book would reveal to him his level of success in gender performativity, by analyzing it ourselves we can reach similar conclusions. Additionally, for each trait of masculinity Schwarz attempts to perform, his obsessive need to check his performance decreases as he ages. As Schwarz becomes more established and materially successful, his anxiety about performing these masculine traits decreased. Therefore, his costume book reflects a lessened need to convince himself and others he possesses the masculine traits of fertility, loyalty, strength and aggression, and material and cultural wealth. Instead, the book implies a heightened confidence in his own portrayal of each trait, or at the very least lessened insecurity.

**Gender Performativity**

In her book *Gender Trouble*, theorist Judith Butler proposes gender performativity. She claims that gender is a series of expressions, acts, and gestures that build an illusion of a constructed gender. That is, Butler claims gender it not natural nor does it stem from a sexed body. Instead, people learn to perform gender, and “the various acts of gender create the idea of
gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.”⁶ She asserts it’s important to recognize that gender is not real and the only way it continues is through the acts of those performing it. Because gender serves clear purposes in society, namely enforcing the heterosexual patriarchy, society punishes those who disturb the illusion or who do not sufficiently perform gender. Any transgression risks gender itself.⁷ It is due to these punishments that people pay particular attention to their gender performance.

Additionally, the people who benefit most from the heterosexual patriarchy are also the ones who most desperately try to sufficiently perform gender. If a heterosexual man performs masculinity to society’s standards, he is rewarded with privilege. Therefore, privileged men do not seek to disrupt the illusion of gender; they seek to reinforce it. They are likely more anxious about their performance, for their own social status depends on the perpetuation of gender, and thus on the success of their performance.

Performing gender takes a certain amount of introspection. A person must recognize not only the proper qualities to portray, but also the mechanisms through which to portray them. This idea is closely linked to self-fashioning, a practice among early modern European elite who sought to shape how others saw them. European elites are known for manipulating images, such as paintings or medals, to exude qualities such as wealth, knowledge, or power. Yet the first presentation of oneself is the body. While examining artifacts like paintings or sculptures certainly reveal a person’s attempts at self-fashioning, they are secondary. The primary way someone presents himself is through his body and clothes.


⁷Butler, Gender Trouble, ed. Warhol, Herndl, p. 471
Matthaus Schwarz was likely skilled in self-fashioning and keenly aware of the implications of his appearance. Schwarz commissioned plenty of artwork meant to emphasize his status, and this was a medium he could closely monitor. However, despite his likely access to mirrors, Schwarz was less able to monitor the perception of his body and clothes. He would assemble the performance yet was never able to watch it. Due to his stake in maintaining the patriarchy and gender, Schwarz had more anxiety about the success of his performance. He felt the need to monitor and gauge his gender performance because he stood to directly benefit from its success. By commission the costume book, Schwarz was able to comfort himself by directly checking how successful his performance of masculinity really was.

Understanding gender as performed is the only way to fully explain the existence of Schwarz’s book. It is clearly meant as a reflection, and assuming gender is constructed means masculinity would be natural. Under that framework, masculinity would be easier for Schwarz to pull off, and he would not need the entire book to document it. Ultimately, the costume book only offers us better understanding of the past if we accept it as a device for Schwarz to understand and see himself.

**Fertility**

One key feature of a successful man in early modern Europe was the ability to reproduce. A fertile man would have heirs and continue the family line. Especially as a young man, Schwarz would want to present himself as full of potential and sexual vibrancy, and Lyndal Roper in *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, sexuality and religion in early modern Europe* notes fashion was an optimal way for young men to present themselves as such.\(^8\) Roper focuses on the

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codpiece as a way to express excessive masculinity, and colorful and outlandish shapes almost made a parody of reserved sexuality. Instead, the codpiece exaggerates “phallic authority” yet still presents the wearer as a sexual figure. Another expression of fertility is in the beard. Will Fisher in his article *The Renaissance Beard: Masculinity in Early Modern Europe* posits that the beard was seen as an extension of “seed” and thus signified “procreative potential”. He explains that a man wasn’t seen as fully mature until he had a beard because facial hair was a “seminal type of excrement”.9 Finally, a sure sign of fertility was health. A healthy, almost childlike man would be best suited to produce healthy offspring, and Schwarz would have been conscious of his need to appear healthy.

In contrast to Fisher’s thesis about the beard, Schwarz chose to capitalize on his ability to look healthy. During his early pictures, he had a cleanly shaven face that appears fresh and clean. While this makes him look childlike, it also assures those around him that he isn’t sickly. I believe this is also evidence of Schwarz’s either distaste for or inability to grow a beard. In the caption for the sixty-second painting, he noted “first beard” where the painting depicts a moustache and facial hair on his chin.10 However, the next pictures show Schwarz clean shaven again, demonstrating he realized the beard wasn’t a compelling tactic for him to use. He chose to depend heavily on his childlike health to portray his fertility in order to compensate for not having a beard. Schwarz would only maintain a beard after he turned thirty-eight, an age Fisher suggests is far older than when Schwarz’s peers would have beards.11 Even when Schwarz consistently had a beard, he noted it less, implying he was less insecure about his facial hair in general.

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Despite the trials of a beard, Schwarz’s strategy of emphasizing youth to perform fertility is effective. He’s far more successful this way in showing reproductive health. Not only did he fashion himself as a youth, but he also showed signs of emotional sensitivity that contribute to the image. For example, Rublack explains Schwarz sometimes wore heart-shaped bags to represent a search for love. In the particular image she references, Schwarz also has a small smile and a thin figure, more evidence for a healthy body.

Schwarz did take a more conventional approach to performing fertility in fashioning his codpieces. Like other young men in Germany at the time, Schwarz wore colorful codpieces, often matching the material of the rest of his outfit. The paintings don’t particularly emphasize the codpieces, however, leading me to believe he wasn’t too concerned with being the “biggest and brightest”. His headwear was often more eye-catching than the codpiece, such as in the fortieth image. Schwarz did just enough with his colorful codpieces to demonstrate vitality. He also included such colorful pieces in nearly every outfit of his youth. Yet, when Schwarz announced to his costume book he had decided to get married, the portrait is of his back. This is evidence he was no longer as nervous about fertility; he didn’t need to check his outfit for signs of fertility. If he was still concerned, the portrait would have shown him his codpiece. Older portraits post marriage feature outfits with coats that cover a codpiece or don’t show one at all, further evidence that once Schwarz established a household and children, he no longer needed to double check his portrayal of fertility.

Loyalty

13 Schwarz, First Book of Fashion, ed. Rublack, Hayward, p. 117.
Loyalty was a significant marker of manhood. As in *The Courtier*, Count Lodovico expresses a desire for a courtier who is “loyal to whomever he serves.”\(^{16}\) Loyalty was closely linked to a man’s honor, and it could also get him rewarded by those he served. Even in a time of political uncertainly, an early modern man strove to show loyalty to friends, rulers, and country. By doing each of these, a man could also expect loyalty in return, creating a mark of a civilized society. Loyalty was expressed through favors and effort, but it was also shown through military service and financial investments.

Schwarz ensured he showed loyalty to those he served, and his efforts to prove loyalty are more prominent when he was younger. In order to demonstrate loyalty to his peers and mentors, Schwarz sought to dress in fashion and put effort into his clothes. When in company with Wolf Breitwyser von Wirtzburg, he wore a silk satin doublet with yellow and black coordinating colors.\(^{17}\) He also wore expensive, intricate clothes when Charles V and other powerful leaders visited, and the more vibrant colors in his wardrobe made an appearance for special events. In fact, a majority of the outfits recorded in Schwarz’s costume book were for special events, indicating that he was particularly concerned with monitoring those appearances. He also incorporated symbolic colors into his outfits meant for political leaders, such as yellow to express joy.\(^{18}\)

Schwarz also desired to show loyalty to his homeland. This is most prominently expressed through military service, and his battle outfits were decorative to bring glory to Germany. Yet even with his military outfits, Schwarz incorporated more flashy designs, such as


\(^{17}\) Schwarz, *First Book of Fashion*, ed. Rublack, Hayward, p. 82.

the headpiece in the fortieth picture. As he aged, he wore plainer armor, with the exception of one suit. This portrait is also unusual because it has an intricate background, and it portrays Schwarz in a full suit of armor with a winged helmet. I believe, since this was past his anxious stage, this portrait was intended more to provoke Schwarz’s memory instead of reflect his performance back to him. By that point, Schwarz had doubly proved his loyalty by serving in other battles, so he felt less obligated to monitor his performance. Schwarz also showed his loyalty to Germany by proudly buying German materials and incorporating them into his dress, demonstrating a pride for his homeland.

Aggression & Strength

As Roper notes, a large part of masculinity is the trouble that comes from masculine aggression. A true man is strong in order to assume the role of patriarch, and early modern European men spent time cultivating that strength. In addition to brute strength, Castiglione lauded Duke Federico for never losing a battle, showing tactical brilliant alongside muscular skill. Furthermore, strength was exhibited through athletic ability. The Courtier posits “I would have him demonstrate strength and lightness and suppleness and be good at all the physical exercises befitting a warrior.” Yet for Schwarz, his attempts to show strength and aggression caved to his desire to display wealth.

Schwarz is no exception, and he strove to demonstrate strength to assert his masculinity. The bulk of his paintings show Schwarz carrying a weapon, usually a sword but occasionally a dagger, spear, or bow and arrow. Sometimes Schwarz incorporated the weapons seamlessly into

21 Roper, Oedipus and the Devil, p. 113.
22 Castiglione, The Book of the courtier, p. 41.
23 Castiglione, The Book of the courtier, p. 61.
the fashion of his outfit, such as a sword with a red hilt to match his clothes. Schwarz also attempted to show his proficiency with weapons, documenting instances of learning fencing or archery. However, Schwarz didn’t display prolonged interest in sports and weapons mastery. He remarked in a caption, casually, “I started shooting again.” This more implies he picked up sports for leisure, and his brilliantly designed clothes while engaging in sports supports this claim. Schwarz attempted to perform athleticism and physical strength, but his actual appearance showed his wealth. Schwarz seemed to make no corrective effort for this performance failure, other than find more ways to display wealth.

Schwarz was perhaps most successful in performing strength through horseback riding. His riding outfits were practical and enhance his skill. As a young man, Schwarz often rode a white horse to imply glory and wisdom. He tried to act like a battle-tested warrior and enjoy the power that it brought. However, he also seemed reckless. Numerous times Schwarz commissioned a painting of him driving a sleigh and the clothes he wore. Yet he explained he destroyed multiple sleighs due to a crash or poorly-trained horse. To Schwarz looking back at these portraits, he seemed wealthy, as if he could afford to waste sleighs. However, this did not accomplish his goal of showing strength. Even an outfit with a sword and carefully decorated horse depicted in the forty-first image did not show a concern for strength over wealth. Schwarz explained he was robbed yet didn’t portray a story of fighting off robbers. Instead, he seemed content that he was wealthy enough to lose said wealth.

As time passed, Schwarz seemed to be more comfortable showing physical weakness. Perhaps he accepted that his attempted to show athleticism and aggression as a younger man had

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mostly failed. Later portraits depict his illness, including a fever and a broken arm.\textsuperscript{27} He even included a victory: being able to walk without a cane as an old, recovered man. His clothes as he aged also seemed less battle-ready. He wore more layers and his clothes weren’t as flexible or as conductive to physical activity.

\textbf{Material & Cultural Wealth}

As explained in the section on aggression and strength, Schwarz would sacrifice performance of other masculine traits in order to emphasize wealth. The first form of wealth is material, which clearly every man saw as a source of pride. Having money was an indicator of accomplishment, and it wasn’t necessarily based on inherited wealth. Castiglione reported Signor Gaspare Pallavicino, an Italian nobleman, as claiming, “Nobility of birth is acquired neither through talent nor through force or skill… it seems very odd to insist that, if the courtier’s parents are of low birth, all his good qualities are spoilt.”\textsuperscript{28} Owning wealth was a sign of those talents and skills, and thus through wealth, a man could make up for a soiled past. Owning material wealth also supplemented all other masculine qualities. Material wealth meant a man could provide for his household and he could afford training and time to become strong, for example. However, cultural wealth is just as significant. The Count in \textit{The Courtier} elaborates, adding, “What the courtier especially requires in order to speak and write well, therefore, is knowledge.”\textsuperscript{29} He later said, “I should like our courtier to be more than average scholar, at least in those studies which we call the humanities.”\textsuperscript{30} Cultural wealth, in a way, indicated the

\textsuperscript{27} Schwarz, \textit{First Book of Fashion}, ed. Rublack, Hayward, p. 176.
\textsuperscript{28} Castiglione, \textit{The Book of the courtier}, p. 56.
\textsuperscript{29} Castiglione, \textit{The Book of the courtier}, p. 76.
\textsuperscript{30} Castiglione, \textit{The Book of the courtier}, p. 94.
presence of material wealth, but it also praised a man for cerebral qualities and sensibilities. In displaying both material and cultural wealth, Schwarz excelled.

Schwarz clearly wanted to show off his wealth in his outfits, detailing the expensive material that often required effort and patience to acquire. He also took delight when an outfit was more expensive to construct than the material itself cost. For example, Rublack fixates on a white outfit that contains more than 4,800 slashes in the material.\textsuperscript{31} The piece is impressive and delicate, meaning Schwarz had to hire skilled tailors to create the outfit for him. He also had to be delicate and careful while wearing the outfit, too, once again highlighting his sophistication and leisure time. Additionally, Schwarz wore jewelry as a young man to display more wealth. However, he had to be careful not to be too excessive. As a result, Schwarz frequently wore a prominent crucifix.\textsuperscript{32} This was a way for him to wear jewelry and precious metals, but also a means to show cultural competence as a devoted Christian. Notably, Schwarz stopped wearing jewelry after he was married, and even the colors in his clothes were less brazen. Schwarz as he aged may also have learned to balance showing material wealth and refraining from excessive. As Schwarz became more established, he felt less of a need to even outwardly express his material wealth. Furthermore, he was more secure in knowing he could adequately walk the line of appropriate displays of wealth.

As observed in \textit{The Courtier}, a well-rounded man also exhibits cultural wealth through knowledge of music.\textsuperscript{33} As a young man, Schwarz attempted to learn to play the lute and project himself as musically inclined.\textsuperscript{34} However, as he aged, Schwarz had no other attempts to show his musical ability, showing he is less motivated to portray something he isn’t as skilled in.

\textsuperscript{31} Schwarz, \textit{First Book of Fashion}, ed. Rublack, Hayward, p. 112.
\textsuperscript{32} Schwarz, \textit{First Book of Fashion}, ed. Rublack, Hayward, p. 83.
\textsuperscript{33} Castiglione, \textit{The Book of the courtier}, p. 94.
\textsuperscript{34} Schwarz, \textit{First Book of Fashion}, ed. Rublack, Hayward, p. 117.
Schwarz further showed cultural wealth by borrowing clothing styles from other cultures, such as a Turkish style or Spanish gown. By wearing his knowledge of the world, he subtly demonstrated to society he was well-traveled and educated. Schwarz also wore material from other countries, but not so much as to cause some to doubt his loyalty to Germany. As he aged, however, he seemed more interesting in ensuring the material was practical. As a young man, Schwarz frequently wore satin, silk, or wool, yet as an older man, he documented more winter clothes featuring Siberian furs. He further had fewer creative outfits that demonstrated his affinity for the humanities, instead focusing on military and family settings.

Conclusion

Schwarz, as an elite, well-educated man in early modern Europe, understood his appearance had a significant impact on how others perceived him. While he was skilled in self-fashioning, Schwarz’s costume book reveals as a young man he was insecure about the success of his gender performance. He clearly sought to benefit from the heterosexual patriarchy, but he knew that the only way to sustain the patriarchy was to contribute to the series of acts and appearances that created the illusion of gender. In this way, he sought to affirm his masculine qualities, and viewing Schwarz’s costume book as an affirmation of Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity allows us to gain more intimate insights from this artifact. Ultimately, this lens will help historians to understand the insecurities of those who seemed so confident in their presentation of gender.

35 Schwarz, First Book of Fashion, ed. Rublack, Hayward, p. 166.
36 Schwarz, First Book of Fashion, ed. Rublack, Hayward, p. 162.
Sources

Primary sources:


Secondary sources:


