

Confined by History

Dress and the Maternal Body 1750-1900

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2020

Certificate of Original Authorship

I, Catriona Fisk declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Design, Architecture and Built Environment at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research has been supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Signature:

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Date:

13/07/2019

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Foreword

Dressing a maternal body, 1989



Figure i: T-shirt used as Maternity Wear, 1989.

Winkled and weathered, this unassuming T-shirt was worn day and night during its owners first pregnancy. Not designed nor marketed as ‘maternity wear’ this garment performed those functions during the last months of the pregnancy, transforming its history into one associated with that period of reproductive bodily change.

It is not a couture, nor even high fashion garment, yet it speaks to a specific moment in the history of dress, with reference to fashion, art and graphic design trends of its era. Pastels, the irreverent and representative indication of a frame, the slightly off-centre positioning of the graphic on the T-shirt, its loose boxy shape, and the screen printing and labelling at the centre back all locate this object in the world of the late 1980s. This shirt also comes from a time and a place where specifically coded maternity wear was available and styles of maternity wear were very specific and often associated with feminine fashion and celebrity, particularly the dotty, frilly and expansive

dresses worn by the then Princess of Wales. The choice to employ this garment as unofficial maternity wear might have been conceived by the owner as a way of separating themselves from that network of ‘unnecessary’ fashionability in their maternity clothing. However, the garment is still encased in a network of culture and time-specific sartorial meanings. This shirt is, in ways that did not perhaps appear obvious at the time, inherently tied with the social milieu of 1989, in addition to having that date literally written on it.



Figure ii: 1980s Maternity Fashions. From left, McCall's 'Today's Mother' Home Sewing Pattern, copyright 1989, Princess Diana at Ascot, 1982, © Getty Images, Butterick Home Sewing Pattern, copyright 1986.

We can read too, some specificities of later twentieth-century gender relations and attitudes to childbearing in the materiality and symbolism of this shirt. As a superficially unisex garment, this raises two interesting questions when applied to a pregnant body. On the one hand, the supposed genderless quality of it is achieved by collapsing the form, yet the other hand the lack of a stereotypically feminine emphasis on the curves of a female form gives this garment the room and lack of abdominal restriction that made it a desirable choice for maternity use. It is tempting to further speculate on the self-positioning work this mother-to-be was performing in choosing this garment. While we can assume practicality and access to the existing garment were factors, the expectant mother also seems to have veered away from the more overtly feminized and infantilised stylings that characterise much late twentieth-century maternity wear. Is this perhaps a reflection

of the expectation that in 1989 this pregnancy did not mark the end of her working life or the cessation of her single identity, in contrast to what would have been expected in the generation before?



Figure iii: Reverse of T-shirt worn as maternity wear, 1989.

It has also been worn, to the point of being worn out, yet not thrown away. Worn holes across the fabric are remnants of the dynamic relationship between this relatively simple piece of fabric and the movement of the body that inhabited it. Scuff marks and stains suggest other uses for the same fabric, as does the rectangular section cut from the centre of the back hem. The garment, these material facts imply, evolved to serve different functions after it was no longer used to cover and contain the body. This implication is borne out by the subsequent life history of the cloth, which was stored in the family ‘rag-box’ for decades, until rescued and revisited in light of this investigation into maternity wear. Thus, the growth of the family and the life of this object continued to be connected, illustrating that while the commercial maternity wear industry may

operate primarily in terms of a small window of usage, lived experience indicates that actual practise is more intertwined with everyday and family life.



Figure iv: Home photograph of T-shirt worn during early stages of labour, July 1989, London, United Kingdom. Courtesy of wearer.



Figure v: T-shirt worn as post-natal maternity and nursing garment, Christmas 1989, Sydney Harbour, Australia. Courtesy of wearer.

This T-shirt is therefore representative of a relationship between dress and maternal bodies more complex than could be gained from studying commercially available maternity fashion. Dating from a period with readily available maternity fashion, this shirt is a model for the relationships women had with their clothing and reproductive bodies in earlier periods. Intertwined narratives of fashion, bodily change, gender identity and personal circumstance arise from this garment, prompting the question of what narratives might arise from similar garments adapted for maternity use in history? Finally, as an unlikely survivor of the familial rag-bag, ascribed a maternity function by personal remembrance and visual photographic evidence, it is emblematic of the process of dispersal and silence that this investigation seeks to redress.

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Abbreviations

BCM	Bucks County Museum
BL	British Library
BM	Brighton Museum
ChM	Chertsey Museum
CS	Chatsworth Archives
CTHS	Connecticut Historical Society
CW	Colonial Williamsburg
CWM	Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary
DAR	Daughters of the American Revolution Museum
ERO	Essex Record Office
FHM	Fashion History Museum
GM	Glasgow Museums
GoC	Gallery of Costume, Manchester City Galleries
HCH	Historic Cherry Hill
HD	Historic Deerfield
HsM	Harris Museum Preston
HM	Hereford Museums
HNE	Historic New England
HRO	Hampshire Record Office
JRL	John Rylands Library University of Manchester
KentHS	Kent History Centre
KHS	Kentucky Historical Society
KSM	Kent State University Museum
LACMA	Los Angeles County Museum of Art
LRO	Lancashire Record Office
MAAS	Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Sydney)
MCNY	Museum of the City of New York

MNHS	Minnesota Historical Society
MM	Maidstone Museum
MoL	Museum of London
NCMH	North Carolina Museum of History
NGV	National Gallery of Victoria
NHHS	New Hampshire Historical Society
NM	Norfolk Museums
NMNI	National Museums Northern Ireland
NMS	National Museums Scotland
NRS	National Records Scotland
NT	National Trust (UK)
OSV	Old Sturbridge Village
RC	Royal Collection
ROM	Royal Ontario Museum
ShipM	Shippensburg University Fashion Museum and Archives
SLM	Symington Collection, Leicestershire Museums
SLNSW	State Library of New South Wales
SLQ	State Library of Queensland
SRO	Staffordshire Record Office
UNC	Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library U. of North Carolina Chapel Hill
UVA	Albert H. Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia
V&A	Victoria and Albert Museum
WAM	Wadsworth Atheneum Museum
WL	Wellcome Library
WM	Walsall Museum
WRHS	Western Reserve Historical Society
WtM	Worthing Museum
WYAS	West Yorkshire Archive Service
YC	York Castle Museum

Abstract

Childbearing was a frequent and meaningful part of many women's lives in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Anglophone world. Equally, fashion and textiles were matters of great consequence to women's bodies and everyday lives. Yet scant scholarly work exists on the intersection between these two, or the question of dressing maternal bodies in a period of great change for both fashion and reproduction. This is particularly true of object-based analyses, an omission often attributed to a lack of survivals and the perceived militant modesty of many sources on the intimate management of women's bodies. Consequently, there exists a significant silence, something of a pregnant pause, in histories of dress, women, and childbearing in the period.

This thesis tackles that omission through a wide-ranging study of the material culture of maternity and dress contained in museum collections in the United Kingdom, U.S.A, Canada and Australia, focusing on 1750-1900. Using a methodological combination of detailed object-based analysis and perspectives on embodiment in dress, this research identified and examined over 300 garments in 51 collections. In so doing this work builds on existing studies of individual maternity garments, specific styles or maternal dress in smaller regions. The challenge of studying maternity wear in a time before the term existed is addressed by instead documenting maternal traces, echoes of the pregnant or breastfeeding body contained in the shape, stains, and stitch marks of surviving garments. These traces are then contextualised and contrasted with archival sources, health and advice literature, advertising, and visual sources to create an object-led account of the variety and richness of the dressed maternal body in the material record. Such an account confounds lingering perceptions of unilaterally limiting domesticity and universal antenatal confinement by placing dressed maternal bodies firmly within the everyday, sociable and fashioned worlds of the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

Centred on notions of visibility, domesticity and fashionability, the discussion employs surviving garments to illustrate the negotiated relationship between dress and reproductive experience in the period. From maternity corsets to altered evening gowns, royal celebrations to colonial passenger

ships, the variety of that relationship is also traced through decades of changing silhouettes and across social and geographic boundaries. It concludes with the development of expressly designed and marketed maternity wear at the close of the nineteenth century amidst falling fertility rates and the birth of ready-to-wear clothing. Encounters with the dressed maternal body in the material record argue for the contribution of surviving dress to understandings of both fashion and childbearing, and provide historical context to ongoing contestations of the simultaneously visible, pregnant, and fashionable body.

Introduction

Before the introduction of reliable contraceptives reproduction was a prominent part of the way women experienced their bodies and their lives. Taking live births and the numerous still births and miscarriages that elude formal registration statistics as evidence, pregnancy clearly arises as a frequent and pervasive part of daily life in that period. Precise fertility rates vary across the geographical and chronological range of this study but included rates (Total Fertility Rate or the number of children a woman passing through her reproductive years could expect to have) of over seven live children for American women at the end of the eighteenth century, and 5.75 in England and Wales in the early 1800s, then dropping significantly towards the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries.¹ Women could find themselves pregnant, hoping to be pregnant, avoiding or recovering from pregnancy for a significant portion of their lives.²

Women were also mostly clothed most of the time. The strict social mores around femininity and fashion across 1750-1900 indicate the significance of dress to women's lives, and the high stakes it carried despite subsequent dismissals of dress as superfluous commerciality. Rituals, visual imagery and etiquette guides testify to the existence of a range of social practices around dress, from christening to mourning, making the role of dress literally a matter of life and death, or rather birth to death.

These seemingly reductive statements about women in history between them mask a glaring absence in narratives of dress history: what did pregnant women wear? Answering this apparently

¹ Judith Walzer Leavitt, *Brought to Bed: Childbearing in America, 1750-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Robert Woods, *The Demography of Victorian England and Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

² For a picture of pre-twentieth-century childbearing see studies of family size and composition particularly those appearing in *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* and *The Economic History Review* from the 1970s to 1990s, as well as histories of family and reproduction such as Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1977), 37-67; Adrian Wilson, *Ritual and Conflict: The Social Relations of Childbirth in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013): 1-54; Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 178-210. Recognising that live and recorded births may not encompass all pregnancies in the historical record, and that these figures are drawn from demographic studies of particular regions, these are simply illustrative examples of the frequency of pregnancy in the life course of eighteenth and nineteenth-century women. A similar picture can be gained from looking at historical women's diaries, such as Judith Walzer Leavitt's use of the Holyoke family diaries to illustrate their obstetrical histories. She found between five and eleven childbirths for the women of that family (with an exception of two births for one woman who died within two years of marriage) during the period from the 1670s to the 1830s. For three of these women Leavitt charted the portion of the first twenty to twenty-three years of married life dedicated to childbearing (both pregnancy and nursing) and found it ranged between half and two thirds of those years. The implication for their clothing needs is clear.

simple query about historical dress practices was the starting point for this thesis. The research followed this initial avenue down paths that questioned the nature of information held in surviving dress and fashion collections, historical myths about the visibility and experience of reproductive bodies, under-explored aspects of dress, the creation of maternity wear as a distinct category and the appropriate balance between literary/cultural concepts and lived experience for studying past dress practices.

This thesis is, in the first instance, a record of the process of searching for maternity in the collected historical record of women's dress in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Pursuing this question challenges many assumptions about survival and evidence in dress history, expands greatly on existing work on female bodies and fashion, and contradicts the image of other cultural histories of reproduction. This is because the dressed maternal body is largely absent, or erased, in written histories of the era, confined in more ways than one in the pages of medical histories or prescriptive conduct guides.

Secondly, this research argues for the value of material culture research and object-oriented methodologies in embodied dress histories, advocating for greater use of such skills not only to expand understandings of well covered ground in the history of fashion and style, but to open new avenues of enquiry into the relationship between fashion, physical garments and changing bodies. Using a novel but adaptable methodology, and the concept of a material maternal trace, this research produced a unique archive of the dressed maternal body. The archive asks for greater subtlety in the way information about dress objects is recorded and communicated. In searching for maternal traces in the material record this thesis focuses on a wide geographic range, broadly covering the Anglophone world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This choice was led by practical knowledge of the nature of museum holdings, supported by the concentration of childbirth and women's history in Britain and the United States, and borne out by finding similar patterns and practices across the geographical scope of the study. Finally, it is a portrait of the effect of late nineteenth-century languages of advertising and consumption on historical perceptions of earlier periods of dress. Revealing the nature of the earliest developments of

maternity wear as a separate category of dress highlights what this commercial and fashionable change brought about, erasing the complex place of reproduction in the way women of the eighteenth and earlier nineteenth centuries related to their clothing. Recapturing the complexity of this relationship in history offers a productive comparison to the contemporary situation, asking if more flexible and more visible necessarily implies more equal.

Maternity wear sits at an intersection between social practice, the “routinised bodily activities” that result from “training the body,”³ and the physicality of the body itself. In many ways this research seeks traces not just of the signs of pregnancy that the body imposes on dress, but also the traces of the ‘training’ that social and cultural mores impose back on to the body. There is a tension between these two forces; a constantly evolving negotiation between the mind and social practice—encompassing fashion, identity and self image—and the body as it makes room for the new body concealed or revealed within. In that tension may lie the uncertainty of identity that Kopytoff highlighted as part of the way society constructs “objects as they construct people.”⁴

Research Questions

This thesis is primarily a dress history of the reproductive body in the period 1750-1900, with implications for the medical and social history of childbirth, histories of women and gender, fashion, material culture studies and collections.

Spanning these cognate fields, the research asks:

- How to **recognise** maternity garments in existing dress collections? What survives and what processes are necessary to identify and collate those extant examples?
- What do these material objects allow the scholar to **re-collect** about the experience of dressing a maternal body in the late eighteenth and through the nineteenth century?

³ Andreas Reckwitz, “Towards a Theory of Social Practices: A Development in Culturalist Thinking,” *European Journal of Social Theory*, 5, 2 (2002): 251.

⁴ Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditisation as Process,” in Arjun Appadurai eds., *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988): 89-90.

- What does the **recovery** of this experience reveal about women's embodied, everyday, reproductive and fashionable lives in the period? How does this relate to the themes of women's and reproduction histories drawn from other sources? What does the recovery of this experience reveal about the relationship between dress, body and identity before the advent of ready-to-wear maternity wear in the early twentieth century?

Overview of Chapters

Chapter One discusses the curious absence of dress from histories of childbirth and of maternity from histories of dress in scholarly literature. The various historiographical concerns that took precedence over dress are reviewed in the first half of the chapter, while the second discusses existing scholarship on the dressed pregnant body in fashion and history. Material culture approaches, gender and the over-turning of grand narratives of change are identified as threads emerging from this literature. These threads demonstrate the value of an object-based approach to maternity dress. Chapter Two discusses the fields of dress history, fashion studies and material culture and the methodologies for object-led research they propose. The methodology of the thesis is discussed and justified in detail, and the features of the main research tool, the database, are explained. Lastly, the contribution of text and visual sources to the thesis is explored. Chapter Three recounts the development of maternal traces and maternal encounters as strategies for making maternal bodies visible in dress collections. Four modes of encounter—accidental, ambiguous, annotated and ascribed—perform that work. Chapter Four exposes the artificiality of the invisibility of the maternal body in history. The first half of the chapter reviews domesticity and separate spheres ideologies in women's and gender history and its influence on dress studies, before turning to the textual record of visibility, activity and fashionability for pregnant women in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The second half of Chapter Four surveys the styles of domestic dress that could be or were worn by maternal figures, and reveals the ways such garments accommodated the reproductive figure in uneasy equilibrium with the fashionable one. Chapter Five comprises several case studies of the negotiation between dress and maternal bodies across economic, social and cultural registers. These cases studies trace how that negotiation varies

acceding to individual status and circumstance. Chapter Six follows a thread from a single garment with a mysterious alteration suggesting use by a breastfeeding mother, using it to explore the tension between fashion and breastfeeding in eighteenth-century dress and culture.

In her foreword to *The Weaker Vessel: Women's Lot in Seventeenth Century England* Antonia Fraser recalls being asked of her topic, "Were there any women in seventeenth-century England?"⁵ A similar question arises regarding the existence of maternity dress and visibly pregnant women before the twentieth century. My answer, contained in the following chapters, is the same as Fraser's —of course there were and the following work details how to find them, what they mean, and why their absence from histories of dress and women's bodies matters.

⁵ Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel: Women's Lot in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Pheonix Press, 1984), xi.

