Luxury or Magnificence? Dress at the Court of Henry VIII

By Maria Hayward

Henry VIII passed four 'Acts against [the] wearing of costly apparel' during his reign;¹ like the sumptuary legislation of his predecessors the intention was to define status with dress, to promote the use of English cloth² and to prevent extravagant dress. An Italian resident in London in 1511 saw preparation for war as an additional motive so 'that the gentry might save their money for the purchase of arms and horses, as nothing else is now talked of '.³ The first act, like the other three, restricted the wearing of silk to lords and knights 'and to set a good example . . . the King and all the noble men of his court had dressed themselves in long grey cloth gowns in the Hungarian fashion'.⁴ The King frequently set his court a very different example that promoted the ideal of conspicuous consumption and relied upon imported materials. That the court responded is most evident in Hall's description of the Field of the Cloth of Gold:

he were much wise that could have tolde or shewed of the riches of apparell that was amongest the Lords and Gentlemenne of England, Cloth of Gold, Cloth of silver, Tinsins, Satins enbroudered and crymosyn satten . . . Surely emong the Englishemeene lacked no riches, nor beautiful apparel or array.⁵

Sir John Fortesque believed that the rich dress of the monarch was integral to an adequate display of magnificence,

Item it shall nede that the kyng haue such tresour . . . as he may bie hym riche clothes, riche furres, . . . riche stones . . . and other juels and ornaments conuenyent to his estate roiall . . . ffor yff a king did not so, nor myght do, he lyved then not like his estate, but rather in miseire, and in more subgeccion than doth a private person. 6

The King had to form the focal point at his court, where he was the source of political power and patronage. Magnificence was interpreted as an Aristotelian virtue and therefore was acceptable. Luxury or 'luxuria' was not. Luxury was equated with lust, the worst of the seven deadly sins. However, visually and financially there would have been very little difference between magnificent and luxurious dress. Both would be sumptuous and expensive. The difference between magnificence and luxury is a moral or philosophical one, and depends upon the individual's viewpoint. Hall, one of the most important and partisan chroniclers of the reign, presented Henry VIII as magnificent: 'The king of Englande shewed hymself somedele forwarde in beautiie and personage, the moste goodliest Prince that ever reigned ouer the Realme of Englande . . . it was marueilous to beholde'. Milton, writing a century later, summed up the opposite point of view very succinctly in *Paradise Regained*. The Son of God told the Tempter

Nor does this grandeur and majestic show Of Luxury, though called magnificence, Much more of arms before, allure mine eye, Much less my mind.⁸

When James I was told in 1607 that it was not the fashion in England to hold a masque on Christmas night, he replied, 'What do you tell me of the fashion? I will make it a fashion'.9 This quotation emphasizes the importance of the royal will and Henry VIII exercised it fully. The dress of the royal family was mentioned only once in the sumptuary legislation, which stated that 'no person of what estate condition or degree that he be use in his apparel any cloth of gold of purple colour or silk of purple colour but only the king, the Queen, the king's mother, the king's children and the king's brothers and sisters'. 10 Therefore the acts placed the dress of the immediate royal family above the scope of the law and Henry VIII took full advantage of this. Henry VIII would certainly have thought of himself as magnificent and he dressed the part. Only one garment or rather an accessory has survived that can be attributed with some degree of certainty to the king himself. It is a hawking glove of embroidered, brown and grey doe skin.11 In addition there is a steel base that forms part of a suit of silvered and engraved armour that belonged to Henry VIII. A base was a pleated skirt which was separate from the jacket or jerkin, that was worn on horseback, either with or without armour. Here the steel base follows the style and form of the textile equivalents and is ornamented around the hem with a band of intertwined Hs and Ks alternating with true lovers' knots. 12 The glove and the base were made to be functional items of sporting equipment and yet they were of good quality and decorated. A profusion of decoration and detail characterized the King's dress as the following description of a gown shows:

Item oone Gowne of purple clothe of Silver tissue with a Caape garded with two burgonyons of purple vellat furred with blac Jennettes and Eight rooses of diamondes set in golde two being greater than threst and Ten Clusters of Peerles fyve peerles in every cluster Like wise set in golde vpon the slevis of the same Gowne.¹³

This gown would have been worn over a shirt, doublet and hose, along with a cap, a girdle and a mass of jewellery. The appearance of magnificence was achieved by a composite of contrasting colours and types of rich cloth, embroidery, fur, frogging, slashing, pinking and the use of precious stones. It was magnified by being seen within the King's apartments which were decorated with cloths and chairs of estate, tapestry and cloth of gold hangings which in turn were hung below gilded and painted ceilings. The end result can be seen very clearly in the anonymous, and in the case of Jane Seymour posthumous, family portrait at Hampton Court, of Henry VIII, Jane and Edward, flanked by Mary and Elizabeth.

At the King's death in 1547 his Wardrobe of Robes held 40 gowns, 13 Spanish cloaks and 8 other cloaks, 26 doublets and 25 pairs of hose. Further caches of clothes were kept in the Secret Wardrobe and the Old Jewel House at the palace of Westminster. He king's clothes were carefully observed by foreign ambassadors and detailed reports sent back to their home courts, and consequently for important state occasions the king invariably wore new clothes. When he did not, it was commented upon. In October 1513 Paulo de Laude, Milanese ambassador to the Holy Roman Emperor, wrote to Massimiliano Sforza, Duke of Milan about the jousts that Henry VIII held to celebrate the capture of Tournai, noting that 'The king wore a vest over his armour which he had worn before, though it is of great beauty, of velvet of divers colours with embroidered stripes of gold, really exquisite'. However,





Figs 1 and 2. The front and back of Henry VIII's hawking glove
The Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

derogatory comments on the King's apparel could be unwise. At the time of the arrest and trial of Anne Boleyn, Chapuys wrote to Charles V that 'she was also charged, and her brother likewise, with having laughed at the king and his dress'. 16

In addition to outer garments such as gowns and doublets, there was the King's linen which was the responsibility of the Groom of the Stool. When Sir William Compton handed the post to Henry Norris on 18 January 1526 there were 93 shirts, 2 night shirts, 22 coifs for wearing at night and at other times, 6 shaving clothes and 75 handkerchiefs. Henry also had a particular fondness for hats. The hats in themselves were not particularly expensive and were predominantly of black velvet. However, his 67 caps or bonnets and one night cap were listed immediately after the entries of plate from the jewel houses because they were so heavily decorated with enamelled and engraved gold buttons, aglettes and jewelled brooches.

The cost of clothing and dress accessories could be very high. During the King's visit to France in 1513 Thomas Jenyns, sergeant of the pellatery, spent £5 6s. 8d. on black ermine for a gown of russet velvet, £17 13s. 4d. to fur a gown of yellow velvet with 'libard womes', and £31 8s. to fur a white velvet gown with powdered ermine. Such levels of expenditure made clothes acceptable New Year's gifts for the King, along with the more usual presents of gold and silver plate, jewels and money. In 1534

the King received eight bonnets, including 'By the lord Rocheford a bonnet of blake veluet with iij paire of buttons viij paire of aglettes xvj other buttons enamiled white and a broche of gold'. He was also given 14 shirts, most of which were decorated with drawn thread work or embroidery, 16 separate embroidered shirt collars, 5 lengths of cambric and 12 handkerchiefs. Equally the government's concern over expensive dress causing indebtedness was not unfounded. Wolsey's household when he was at the height of his power had rivalled that of the King in splendour. At his death in 1530 he was heavily in debt for cloth, jewels and plate, and in April 1533 Richard Gresham, a leading London Mercer, was still petitioning the King to settle Wolsey's bills. ²⁰

Henry bought predominantly foreign materials: Italian silks, linen from the Low Countries, furs from the merchants of the Steelyard. He also bought finished garments such as a doublet and hose 'of white silk and gold knit' and a set of crimson and gold, 'bought from Christopher Milliner'.²¹ When import licences were granted they were conditional upon the King having 'first sight and choice of the goods'.²² This rule applied not only to cloth, but also to finished garments and jewels, both set and unset. While the clothes of most of his household were black, tawny, and russet, many of his clothes were purple, crimson or black or coloured cloth of gold or silver. These colours had strong royal and imperial connotations which Henry was keen to exploit. The King's wardrobe was not limited by such considerations, though. The wardrobe lists in the 1547 inventory also included items that were incarnate, white, green, yellow, tawny, russet and orange, and this range of colours is echoed in the lengths of the fabric stored in the Great Wardrobe and the Secret Wardrobe at Westminster. Thus the King was distinguished from the rest of his court by the quantity, variety, cost and colour of his clothes.

The concept of magnificence required a sumptuous display whilst avoiding unnecessary extravagance. This was partly achieved by reusing elements of the King's garments. A marginal note in the 1542 inventory of Westminster records that a mantle containing 72 sable backs was sent to Katherine Addington, the King's skinner on 9 July 1544 'to the use of his King's majesty'. 23 Jewelled buttons were reset to create new schemes for sleeves. Nine embroidered coverings for bards in the care of George Lovekyn were sent to Richard Gibson and Thomas Forster, embroiderer, 'to ryppe [out] and be put vppon Russet and white'.24 The precious metal decorations used on masque costumes and horse trappers would be removed and sent back to the goldsmiths and gold wire drawers to be reworked. However, they were easily lost and frequently stolen. In February 1511, 439 and a half ounces of gold H's and K's and hearts were supplied for a revel; 887 motifes were 'Set on the King's apparel. On Sir T. Knevett's, 893 . . . The King's and Knevett's dresses were damaged and lost to the extent of 225 oz of gold'. 25 Finally some of the King's old clothes were recycled. In 1540 a gown of purple satin, a frock of crimson velvet, a doublet of crimson satin, one of purple velvet, one of purple satin, one of purple gold tissue and two of purple silver tissue were reused to line cushions.²⁶

The surviving wardrobe warrants show that Henry VIII oversaw the choice of clothes, furnishings and saddlery for his female relatives. They were signed by Henry and headed 'By the king'. Particular care was taken with his sister Mary Tudor's,

trousseau for her marriage to Louis XII of France. Her clothes were designed to ensure that the French thought them elegant and fashionable and that they reflected the wealth and prestige of her brother. Although Henry's wives were responsible for the dress of their households, 27 his control of their clothing reflected their changing status, though Anne Boleyn's fall was so rapid that there is little evidence of this. She was arrested on May Day 1536, tried on 15 May and executed four days later. A description of 19 May 1536 recorded that after making a short speech, 'she was then stripped of her short mantle furred with ermines'.28 In contrast Katherine Howard was arrested in November 1541 but not executed until February 1542. During the interim she was imprisoned at Syon House and her furnishings and clothing reflected her precarious position. Archbishop Cranmer was instructed by the Privy Council to provide 'the furniture of three chambers, hanged with mean stuff, without any cloth of estate'.29 The wealth of the household goods that she lost can be gauged from a list of her chapel stuff recorded in the 1542 inventory of the palace of Westminster. The entry included vestments and altar frontals of cloth of gold, murray velvet, purple silk, and white silver tissue.30 Her jewels were inventoried and confiscated. She was allowed to keep six French hoods 'with thappurtenaunces, with edges of goldesmythes worke, so there be no stone nor perle in the same; and likewise as many paire of sleves, six gownes and six kyrtelles of saten damask, and velwet, with suche thinges as belong to the same, except alwayes stone and perle'. 31 In marked contrast, Henry's pleasure at gaining the annulment of his marriage to Anne of Cleves was clearly expressed in the very generous settlement. Anne's position as 'the king's sister' was reinforced with grants of 'pretiusissimas vestes', jewels and pearls.32 Anne appears to have made the most of her freedom. The French ambassador Marillac wrote to Francis I that 'Madame de Cleves so far from claiming to be married, is more joyous than ever, and wears new dresses every day'.33

The King's household was divided into two sections: the domus providentiae and the domus magnificentiae. It was the Chamber, and later the Privy Chamber beyond it, that were described as magnificent as was fitting for the area inhabited by the King. It was reflected in the dress of those who worked there. The most important officers, such as the Chamberlain and the Steward, were drawn from the major noble families and they were not provided with clothing from the Great Wardrobe except for royal funerals and coronations. Their offices were clearly denoted by the livery chains that they wore and the white staffs of office that they carried. These can be seen very clearly in Holbein's portrait of Thomas Howard, 3rd Duke of Norfolk, who holds his stave as Lord Treasurer and the Earl Marshal's baton. However, apart from these men, the royal household was one area in which the King could impose a set pattern of dress because most household officers were supplied with livery by the Great Wardrobe. Indeed details of the colour, type and quantity of cloth and any decoration or fur were stipulated by royal warrant. All the gentlemen and officers of the Privy Chamber, the Privy Chamber musicians and, after 1539, the newly formed Gentleman Pensioners, wore black damask gowns guarded with black velvet and furred with budge, with a coat and doublet of black velvet and a gold livery chain. This form of dress can be seen in the portrait of Sir William Palmer, a Gentleman Pensioner, attributed to Gerlach Flicke. In the more menial offices the clothing reflected the hierarchy. The sergeants of the buckhounds had doublets of satin at 8s. the ell, while the yeomen and grooms had doublets of camlet at 3s. 8d. the yard. The sergeants received bonnets costing 5s. each, while those for the grooms cost 3s. 8d. In addition, the grooms who followed the hounds on foot, received seven pairs of double-soled shoes twice a year. 34 Craftsmen, such as the master mason, master joiner, purveyor of works and the King's coffer maker, who belonged to the extended household, received each year at Easter 'one Cooate of Redd clothe of our livery enbraudered with the letters H and R before and behind lined with black'. Their clothing was essentially a uniform that was chosen by the King, but in all the sumptuary acts it was stated that the rules they contained did not apply to the King's livery. 36 The primary aims of the livery were to reflect the wealth of the King and to define the membership of the household, regardless of the officers' social standing and wealth.

In addition to the royal household, there were the officers of state. Their status was recognized in the 1533 sumptuary act. The Lord Chancellor, the Lord Treasurer of England, the President of the King's Council and the Lord Privy Seal were sanctioned to wear, regardless 'of what estate or degree so ever they be beside those rooms . . . velvet, satin and any silk of any colour except purple and any type of fur except black jennet'. This placed them directly below the immediate royal family, who were allowed to wear purple and jennet furs, and above the dukes, the first rank of the nobility. This elevation of the four key offices of state was formally recognized seven years later in the 1539 Act of Precedence that established an official hierarchy within the government and which superseded the social hierarchy. Towards the end of the reign this official hierarchy was increasingly echoed by the membership of the Order of the Garter.

The Henrician sumptuary laws acknowledged that the King could 'grant and give licence and authority to such of his subjects as his grace shall think convenient to wear all and such singular apparell on his body or his horses as shall stand with the pleasure of the king's grace'. 39 This allowed the King to promote his close friends, and evidence of this type of dispensation can be seen most clearly in the costumes provided for the revels and jousts. The style and colour of the costumes were closely discussed with the King and could be used to contradict the normal social order. Consequently members of the court, who were socially above the rank to wear two-coloured livery, could be dressed in the Tudor colours of green and white. At the revel of February 1511 six green satin ladies' gowns were appliqued with 184 H's and K's cut from white satin. The green and white livery was more commonly associated with the lower social ranks; the soldiers on the Mary Rose were provided with green and white coats in 1511 at a cost of 6s. 8d. and in June 1530 Henry ordered a green and white coat for one of his trumpeters.⁴⁰ At the same revel in 1511, the King, Sir Thomas Knyvet, Charles Brandon, Sir Edward Neville, Sir Henry Guildford and the Earls of Essex and Wiltshire all wore hose of cloth of gold, Milan bonnets of blue velvet and doublets of 'shining' blue satin. While Charles Brandon and Henry Guildford did not have the same social standing as the rest, these ephemeral clothes defined them as part of the King's circle at an important court occasion. Thus intimacy with the King could cut across social groupings as defined in the sumptuary legislation, and one of the clearest ways that this was expressed was in dress.

his gown of gold that was described as a 'Departure of the King's apparel'. ⁴⁵ According to the fourth sumptuary act dukes and marquises could wear cloth of gold only in their doublets and sleeveless coats 'and in none other garments'. Surrey was merely an earl and a gown was defined as 'outermost apparel'. The Earl was executed on 19 January 1547.

The case against the Earl bears striking similarities to that brought against the Duke of Buckingham twenty-five years earlier. Edward Stafford was well known for his extravagant dress throughout the reign of Henry VII, and this continued into the following reign. In 1513 when Henry VIII met the Holy Roman Emperor, Maximilian I, Buckingham wore 'purple satten, his apparel . . . full of Antelop and Swannes of fine gold bullion and full of Spangles, and little Belles of golde, marueylous costly and pleasant to behold'. Although purple was officially restricted to the immediate royal family, no attempt appears to have been made to control his dress on such occasions. However by 1521 a rift had developed between the King and the Duke, exacerbated by the Duke's excessive retaining and use of his livery. Witnesses at his trial also claimed that he had bought cloth of gold, cloth of silver and other silks worth 300–400 marks on several occasions and distributed these fabrics to members of the King's guard in an attempt to 'procure adherents'. Buckingham was convicted for treason, and 'this was among the few state trials of the reign in which the victim was almost certainly guilty of the basic offence with which he was charged'.

Not all of Henry's contemporaries were comfortable with the King's magnificence. Thomas More expressed disquiet about the excessive use of luxury goods in his book Utopia, published in 1516. 'From the Utopians' point of view . . . splendour was merely degrading'. '49 The Utopians used gold for chamber pots and chains for slaves, jewels were only worn by children and silk was not valued. However, Utopia means 'no place' and when at court More conformed to the dress codes. Holbein's portrait dated 1527 shows him wearing a dark velvet gown guarded with fur and a gold livery chain. However, unlike Sir Henry Guildford, controller of the King's household, who was painted wearing a doublet of cloth of gold, More wore a doublet of slightly more modest crimson velvet. In private life More preferred a simpler style of dress. '50 While Hall described the Field of the Cloth of Gold as the ultimate expression of princely magnificence by both Henry VIII and Francis I, Bishop John Fisher did not. He preached a sermon on the Field of the Cloth of Gold and after describing the wonders of the dress of those present he continued,

The pleasures whereof I spake, had many interruptions . . . The gowns of velvet and of cloth of gold were full of dust . . . The wind blew down many tents, shook sore the houses that were builded for pleasure . . . In heaven is no such interruptions. 51

More and Fisher both believed in the humanist ideals and had very strong religious convictions. Later in the reign they were both executed, not for their disapproval of the luxurious, but because they would not accept Henry VIII as Head of the Church of England.

For almost every important event described in Hall's *Chronicle* there is an account of the King's clothes and very rarely a reference to what he said. The visual impression was as important in the sixteenth century as it is now. In addition Holbein created the

imposing image of the King still familiar in the Whitehall mural. In spite of some contemporary criticism, the abiding impression is and was of the magnificence of the King and his court. The French described the English ambassadors in 1518 as being dressed 'in pompous array', and on both of Charles V's visits to England, the Spanish were impressed by the wealth of the English King. It was in this way, and not on the battlefield, that Henry succeeded in presenting himself as their equal within the European sphere. Within the court and his household, he could regulate and manipulate the dress of those immediately around him by direct personal intervention to reflect his favour — or lack of it — and to promote himself.

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² The acts ban cloth 'made out of this realm of England, Ireland, Wales, Calais, or the Marches of the same, or

Berwick' to all men under the degree of a Lord or a Knight of the Garter

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⁵ E. Hall, The Union of the two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York (1809), pp. 608-09. (Hereafter Chronicle.)

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In the fourth act of the reign, this is expanded to include black jennet furs.

The glove, along with a hawk's hood, is part of the collection of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, no. 1685 B 228. The provenance of the glove is discussed in D. Starkey (ed.), Henry VIII: A European Court in England (1991), p. 164, and in A. MacGregor (ed.), The Late King's Goods (London and Oxford, 1989), pp. 406-07.

12 The armour is part of the collection at the Royal Armouries, Inv. no. II.5. See C. Blair, 'The Emperor Maximilian's Gift of Armour to King Henry VIII and the Silvered and Engraved Armour at the Tower of London', in Archaeologia, XLIX (1965), pp. 1-52, esp. pp. 3, 7. I would like to thank Claude Blair for bringing the base to my attention.

13 E315/160, f. 1r.
14 BL Harley MS 1419 A and B, The Wardrobe of the Robes, ff. 398r-415v; The Secret Wardrobe Westminster, ff. 91r-93v; and the Old Jewel House, ff. 160v-168v.

15 Calendar of State Papers, Milan (1385-1618), vol. 1, no. 669.

16 J. S. Brewer, J. Gairdner, R. H. Brodie et al. (ed.), Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of

Henry VIII, 21 vols and Addenda (1862–1932), x, 908 p. 398. (Hereafter LP.).

SP1/37, ff. 32r–35r. The style of the King's night caps may be similar to that embroidered with blackwork worn by Henry Fitzroy, Duke of Richmond, in the miniature of c. 1534-35, attributed to Lucas Horenbout.

18 BL Stowe MS 146, f. 110r.
19 E101/421/13 m. 1 (LPVII, 9).

²⁰ *LP* VI, 330.

Holbein, who painted these portraits, liked to wear rich clothes and was described on his visit to Basle in 1538 as 'dressed in silks and velvets'; see J. Rowlands, Holbein: The Paintings of Hans Holbein the Younger (Oxford,

1985), p. 77.

S1 A lengthy extract from the sermon is printed in D. Starkey (ed.), Rivals in Power (1990), p. 56.