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A history of lace

Palliser, Bury

London, 1875

Zürcher Hochschule der Künste

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Chapter XXVIII. George III.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

GEORGE III.

"In clothes, cheap handsomeness doth bear the bell,
 Wisdome's a trimmer thing than shop e'er gave.
 Say not then, This with that lace will do well;
 But, This with my discretion will be brave.
 Much curiousnesse is a perpetual wooing,
 Nothing with labour, fully long a doing."

Herbert, The Church Porch.

IN 1760 commences the reign of George III. The king was patriotic, and did his best to encourage the fabrics of his country.

From the year 1761, various acts were passed for the benefit of the lace-makers: the last, that of 1806, "increases the duties on foreign laces."¹

Queen Charlotte, on her first landing in England, wore, in compliment to the subjects of her royal consort, a fly cap richly trimmed with lappets of British lace, and a dress of similar manufacture.

The Englishman, however, regardless of the Anti-Gallicans, preferred his "Macklin" and his Brussels to all the finest productions of Devonshire or Newport Pagnel.

Ruffles,² according to the fashion of Tavistock Street and St. James's, in May 1773, still continued long, dipped in the sauce alike by clown and cavalier.³

"The beau,
 A critic styled in point of dress,
 Harangues on fashion, point, and lace."

A man was known by his "points; he collected lace, as, in these more athletic days, a gentleman prides himself on his

¹ If imported in smaller quantities than twelve yards, the duty imposed was 2l. per yard.

² "Let the ruffle grace his hand,
 Ruffle, pride of Gallie land."
The Beau, 1755.

³ "And dip your wristbands
 (For cuffs you've none) as comely in the sauce
 As any courtier."
Beaumont and Fletcher.

pointers or his horses. We read in the journals of the time how on the day after Lord George Gordon's riots, a report ran through London that the Earl of Effingham, having joined the rioters, had been mortally wounded, and his body thrown into the Thames. He had been recognised, folks declared, by his point lace ruffles.⁴

Mr. Damer, less known than his wife, the talented sculptor and friend of Horace Walpole, appeared three times a day in a new suit, and at his death⁵ left a wardrobe which sold for 15,000*l*.⁶ Well might have been said of him—

“ We sacrifice to dress, till household joys
And comforts cease. Dress drains our cellars dry,
And keeps our larder bare; puts out our fires,
And introduces hunger, frost, and woe,
Where peace and hospitality might reign.”⁷

There was “no difference between the nobleman and city 'prentice, except that the latter was sometimes the greater beau,” writes the “Female Spectator.”⁸

“His hands must be covered with fine Brussels lace.”⁹

Our painters of the last century loved to adorn their portraits with the finest productions of Venice and Flanders; modern artists consider such decorations as far too much trouble. “Over the chimney-piece,” writes one of the essayists, describing a citizen's country box, “was my friend's portrait, which was drawn bolt upright in a full-bottomed periwig, a laced cravat, with the fringed ends appearing through the button-hole (Steinkirk fashion). Indeed, one would almost wonder how and where people managed to afford so rich a selection of laces in their days, did it not call to mind the demand of the Vicarress of Wakefield ‘to have as many pearls and diamonds put into her picture as could be given for the money.’”

Ruffles were equally worn by the ladies:—¹⁰

“Frizzle your elbows with ruffles sixteen;
Furl off your lawn apron with flounces in rows.”¹¹

⁴ He had retired to the country to be estimated at the same sum.
out of the way. ⁷ Cowper.

⁵ August 1776. ⁸ 1757.

⁶ The wardrobe of George IV. was ⁹ “Monsieur à la Mode,” 1753.

¹⁰ “Let of ruffles many a row
Guard your elbows white as snow.”

The Belle, 1755.

“Gone to a lady of distinction with a Brussels head and ruffles.”

The Fool of Quality, 1766.

¹¹ “Receipt for Modern Dress,” 1753.

Indeed, if we may judge by the intellectual conversation overheard and accurately noted down by Miss Burney,¹² at Miss Monckton's (Lady Cork) party, court ruffles were inconvenient to wear:—

“ ‘ You can't think how I am encumbered with these nasty ruffles,’ said Mrs. Hampden.

“ ‘ And I dined in them,’ says the other. ‘ Only think!’

“ ‘ Oh!’ answered Mrs. Hampden, ‘ it really puts me out of spirits.’ ”

Both ladies were dressed for a party at Cumberland House, and ill at ease in the costume prescribed by etiquette. If this conversation was considered worth noting down, we may be excused for repeating it.

Our history of English lace is now drawing to a close; but before quitting the subject, we must, however, make some allusion to the custom prevalent here, as in all countries, of using lace as a decoration to grave-clothes. In the chapter devoted to Greece, we have mentioned how much lace is still taken from the tombs of the Ionian Islands, washed, mended, or, more often, as a proof of its authenticity, sold in a most disgusting state to the purchaser. The custom was prevalent at Malta, as the lines of the dramatist testify:—

“ In her best habit, as the custom is,
You know, in Malta, with all ceremonies
She's buried in the family monument,
I' the temple of St. John.”¹³

At Palermo you may see the mummies thus adorned in the celebrated catacombs of the Capuchin convent.¹⁴

In Denmark,¹⁵ Sweden, and the north of Europe,¹⁶ the custom was general. The mass of lace in the tomb of the once fair Aurora Königsmarck, at Quedlinburg, would in itself be a fortune. She sleeps clad in the richest point d'Angleterre, Malines, and guipure.

¹² “ Recollections of Madame d'Arblay.”

¹³ Beaumont and Fletcher, “ The Knight of Malta.”

¹⁴ In coffins with glass tops. Some of them date from 1700.

¹⁵ In the vault of the Schleswig-Holstein family, at Sonderburg.

¹⁶ In the church of Revel lies the Due de Croÿ, a general of Charles XII., arrayed in full costume, with a rich flowing

tie of fine guipure; not that he was ever interred—his body had been seized by his creditors for debt, and there it still remains.

The author of “ Letters from a Lady in Russia ” (1775), describing the funeral of a daughter of Prince Menzikoff, states she was dressed in a night-gown of silver tissue, on her head a fine laced mob, and a coronet; round her forehead, a ribbon embroidered with her name and age, &c.

Setting aside the jewels which still glitter around her parchment form, no daughter of Pharaoh was ever so richly swathed.¹⁷

In Spain, it is related as the privilege of a grandee : all people of a lower rank are interred in the habit of some religious order.¹⁸

Taking the grave-clothes of St. Cuthbert as an example, we believe the same custom to have prevailed in England from the earliest times.¹⁹

Mrs. Oldfield, the celebrated actress, who died in 1730, caused herself to be thus interred. The lines of Pope have long since immortalised the story :—

“Odious! in woollen! ’twould a saint provoke!
(Were the last words that poor Narcissa spoke.)
No, let a charming chintz and Brussels lace
Wrap my cold limbs, and shade my lifeless face;
One would not, sure, be frightful when one’s dead—
And—Betty—give this cheek a little red.”

“She was laid in her coffin,” says her maid, “in a very fine Brussels lace head, a Holland shift with a tucker of double ruffles, and a pair of new kid gloves.” Previous to her interment in Westminster Abbey, she lay in state in the Jerusalem Chamber.²⁰ For

¹⁷ Alluding to this custom of interring ladies of rank in full dress, Madame de Sévigné writes to her daughter:—“Mon Dieu, ma chère enfant, que vos femmes sont sottes, vivantes et mortes! Vous me faites horreur de cette fontange; quelle profanation! cela sent le paganisme, ho! cela me dégoûteroit bien de mourir en Provence; it faudroit que du moins je fusse assuré qu’on ne m’iroit pas chercher une coëffuse en même temps qu’un plombier. Ah! vraiment! fi! ne parlez plus de cela.”—*Lettre* 627. Paris, 13 Dec. 1688.

¹⁸ Laborde, “Itin. de l’Espagne.” Again, the Duc de Luynes says: “The Curé of St. Sulpice related to me the fashion in which the Duke of Alva, who died in Paris in 1739, was by his own will interred. A shirt of the finest Holland, trimmed with new point lace, the finest to be had for money; a new coat of Vardez cloth, embroidered in silver; a new wig; his cane on the right, his sword on the left of his coffin.”—*Mémoires*.

¹⁹ That grave-clothes were lace-trimmed we infer by the following strange announcement in the “London Gazette”

for August 12 to 15, 1678:—“Whereas decent and fashionable lace shifts and Dressings for the dead, made of woollen, have been presented to his Majesty by Amy Potter, widow (the first that put the making of such things in practice), and his Majesty well liking the same, hath upon her humble Petition, been graciously pleased to give her leave to insert this advertisement, that it may be known she now wholly applies herself in making both lace and plain of all sorts, at reasonable prices, and lives in Crane Court in the Old Change, near St. Paul’s Church Yard.” Again, in November of the same year, we find another advertisement:—“His Majesty, to increase the woollen manufacture and to encourage obedience to the late act for burying in woollen, has granted to Amy Potter the sole privilege of making all sorts of woollen laces for the decent burial of the dead or otherwise, for fourteen years, being the first inventor thereof.”

²⁰ Betterton’s “History of the English Stage.” Her kindness to the poet Savage is well known.

Mrs. Oldfield in her lifetime was a great judge of lace, and treasured a statuette of the Earl of Strafford, finely carved in ivory by Grinling Gibbons, more, it is supposed, for the beauty of its lace Vandyrke collar²¹ than any other sentiment.

In 1763, another instance is recorded in the "London Magazine," of a young lady buried in her wedding clothes, point lace tucker, handkerchief, ruffles, and apron; also, a fine point lappet head. From this period, we happily hear no more of such extravagances.

Passing from interments and shrouds to more lively matters we must quote the opinion of that Colossus of the last century, Dr. Johnson, who, instead of sticking to his Dictionary, was too apt to talk on matters of taste and art, of which he was no competent judge. "A Brussels trimming," declaims he to Mrs. Piozzi, "is like bread sauce; it takes away the glow of colour from the gown, and gives you nothing instead of it: but sauce was invented to heighten the flavour of our food, and trimming is an ornament to the manteau or it is nothing."²² A man whose culinary ideas did not soar higher than bread sauce could scarcely pronounce on the relative effect and beauty of point lace.

If England had leant towards the products of France, in 1788, an Anglomania ran riot at Paris. Ladies wore a cap of mixed lace, English and French, which they styled the "Union of France and England." On the appearance of the French Revolution, the classic style of dress—its India muslins and transparent gauzes—caused the ancient points to fall into neglect. From this time dates the decline of the lace manufacture throughout Europe.

Point still appeared at court and on state occasions, such as on the marriage of the Princess Caroline of Wales, 1795, but as an article of daily use, it gradually disappeared from the wardrobes of all classes. A scrupulous feeling also arose in ladies' minds as to the propriety of wearing articles of so costly a nature, forgetting how many thousands of women gained a livelihood by its manufacture. Mrs. Hannah More, among the first, in her "Cœlebs in Search of a Wife," alludes to the frivolity of the taste, when the little child exclaimed "at the beautiful lace with which the frock of another was trimmed, and which she was sure her mamma had

²¹ This seems to have been a spécialité of Gibbons; for we find among the treasures of Strawberry Hill: "A beautiful cravat, in imitation of lace, carved by

Gibbons, very masterly."—*Hist. and Antiquities of Twickenham*. London, 1797.

²² Mrs. Piozzi's "Memoirs."

given her for being good," remarks, "A profitable and, doubtless, lasting and inseparable association was thus formed in the child's mind between lace and goodness."

Whether in consequence of the French Revolution, or from the caprice of fashion, "real" lace—worse off than the passements and points of 1634, when in revolt—now underwent the most degrading vicissitudes. Indeed, so thoroughly was the taste for lace at this epoch gone by that in many families collections of great value were, at the death of their respective owners, handed over as rubbish to the waiting-maid.²³ Many ladies recollect in their youth to have tricked out their dolls in the finest Alençon point, which now would sell at a price far beyond their purses. Among the few who, in England, unseduced by frippery blonde, never neglected to preserve their collections entire, was her late royal highness the Duchess of Gloucester, whose lace was esteemed among the most magnificent in Europe.

When the taste of the age again turned towards the rich productions of the preceding centuries, much lace, both black and white, was found in the country farm-houses, preserved as remembrances of deceased patrons by old family dependents. Sometimes the hoard had been forgotten, and was again routed out from old wardrobes and chests, where it had lain unheeded for years. Much was recovered from theatric wardrobes and the masquerade shops, and the church, no longer in its temporal glory, both in Italy, Spain, and Germany, gladly parted with what, to them, was of small value, compared with the high price given for it by amateurs. In Italy perhaps the fine fabrics of Milan, Genoa, and Venice, had fared best, from the custom which prevailed of sewing up family lace in rolls of linen to insure its preservation.

After years of neglect, lace became a "mania." In England the literary ladies were the first to take it up. Sydney Lady Morgan and Lady Stepney quarrelled weekly on the respective

²³ A lady, who had very fine old lace, bequeathed her "wardrobe and lace" to some young friends, who, going after her death to take possession of their legacy, were surprised to find nothing but new lace. On inquiring of the old faithful Scotch servant what had become of the old needle points, she said: "Deed it's aw there, 'cept a whien auld Dudds, black and ragged, I flinged on the fire."

Another collection of old lace met with an equally melancholy fate. The maid, not liking to give it over to the legatees in its coffee-coloured hue, sewed it carefully together, and put it in a strong soap lye on the fire, to simmer all night. When she took it out in the morning, it was reduced to a jelly. Medea's caldron had not been more effectual!

value and richness of their points. The former at one time commenced a history of lace, though what was the ultimate fate of the MS. the author is unable to state. The Countess of Blessington, at her death, left several chests filled with the finest antique lace of all descriptions.

The "dames du grande monde," both in England and France, now began to wear lace. But, strange as it may seem, never at any period did they appear to so little advantage as during the counter-revolution of the lace period. Lace was the fashion, and wear it somehow they would; though that somehow often gave them an appearance, as the French say, "du dernier ridicule," simply from an ignorance displayed in the manner of arranging it. That lace was old seemed sufficient to satisfy all parties. They covered their dresses with odds and ends of all fabrics, without attention either to date or texture. We recollect one English lady appearing at a ball given by the French embassy at Rome, boasting that she wore on the tablier of her dress every description of lace, from point coupé, of the sixteenth, to Alençon, of the eighteenth century. H. R. H. the Count of Syracuse was accustomed to say: "The English ladies buy a scrap of lace as a souvenir of every town they pass through, till they reach Naples, they sew it on their dresses, and make one grand toilette of the whole to honour our first ball at the Academia Nobile."

The taste for lace has again become universal, and the quality now produced renders it within the reach of all classes of society; and though by some the taste may be condemned, it gives employment to thousands and ten thousands of women, who find it more profitable and better adapted to their strength than the field labour which forms the occupation of the women in agricultural districts. To these last, in a general point of view, the lace-maker of our southern counties, who works at home in her own cottage, is superior, both in education, refinement, and morality:—

"Here the needle plies its busy task;
The pattern grows, the well-depicted flower,
Wrought patiently into the snowy lawn,
Unfolds its bosom; buds, and leaves, and sprigs,
And curling tendrils, gracefully dispos'd,
Follow the nimble fingers of the fair—
A wreath that cannot fade, of flowers that blow
With most success when all besides decay."²⁴

²⁴ Cowper, "The Winter Evening."