



Shaping Femininity: Foundation Garments, the Body and Women in Early Modern England, Sarah A. Bendall, Bloomsbury, London, England, 2022, Acknowledgements, Notes, List of Abbreviations, Glossary, Bibliography, Illustrations, Index, 150 Colour Illustrations, 352 pages, Softback, £27.99.

Dr. Sarah A. Bendall's recently published book *Shaping Femininity: Foundation Garments, the Body and Women in Early Modern England* addresses a substantial gap in the study and research of historical dress. Early Modern foundation garments have not yet been the subject of a single,

comprehensive monograph and their role in society has been little elaborated upon by both present and past scholars, so it is high time that a volume dedicated to the subject was published. Dr. Bendall is a material culture historian who obtained her PhD from the University of Sydney in 2018. She is currently a Research Fellow at the Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences at ACU Melbourne and has published numerous articles on her research about Early Modern women's clothing. This monograph is based on her doctoral research.

By focusing on Early Modern foundation wear, primarily on bodies, defined by the author as "torso-covering garments designed to hold the female body in a conical shape, specifically by compressing the stomach and flattening or raising the breasts" (p. 3), and farthingales, "skirt shaping undergarments that enlarged the lower half of the female body" (p. 3), Dr. Bendall builds a comprehensive, engaging, and thoroughly researched picture of why such items of foundation wear were worn, how they were made and used, how they were obtained by members of varying social classes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and most importantly perhaps how they were linked to Early Modern ideas and ideals of femininity. The book is easy to follow and visually compelling with 150 illustrations, including oil paintings and engravings, reproduced in their original colours.

The book is thematically divided into seven clearly organised chapters, each addressing a specific theme around the concept of the Early Modern female body: “1. The Foundations of the Body: Foundation Garments and the Early Modern Female Silhouette,” “2. The Artificial Body: Courtiers, Gentlewomen and Disputed Visions of Femininity, 1560-1650,” “3. The Socially Mobile Body: Consumption of Foundation Garments by Middling and Common Women, 1560-1650,” “4. The Body Makers: Commissioning and Making Foundation Garments in Early Modern England,” “5. The Everyday Body: Assumptions, Tropes and the Lived Experience,” “6. The Sexual Body: Eroticism, Reproduction and Control,” and “7. The Respectable Body: Rising Consumption and the Changing Sensibilities of Late Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century England.” Each chapter is engagingly written with the key concepts and research methods presented in such a way that even readers who possess no prior knowledge of Early Modern fashions can understand the author’s message.

Where this work truly shines is in Dr. Bendall’s presentation of her own practical work in the field of experimental history and her interpretation of the ongoing “embodied turn” in dress history. The book features six reconstructions made by the author using two different methodological approaches: reproducing surviving seventeenth century bodies using their exact patterns and dimensions, and a more experimental approach combining archival research with visual sources and knowledge of Early Modern sewing techniques to recreate two French farthingales of which no examples are known to have survived. The significance of these reconstructions is bolstered by the high-quality images of them being worn by a living model demonstrating how these garments mould, support, and modify the wearer's body.

Through her use of visual and written primary sources (including letters, ledgers, and literary works), Dr. Bendall demonstrates irrefutably that women’s foundation garments were inseparable from the contemporary interpretation and observations of female bodies. Early Modern femininity was defined by the garments, which shaped and moulded the wearer. The author ends with a powerful and pointed message that is still much needed in the study of fashion history today: foundation garments were not instruments of torture or proof of women’s “silly” fashion foibles, and to dismiss them as such undermines the

agency of the women who wore them (p. 252). Early Modern perceptions of femininity still effect the discourse about femininity and foundation garments today, and until we can understand the nature and context of the foundation garments worn in any given time period, we cannot understand how women chose to (or choose to!) experience and display their own bodies.

This book is a valuable addition to the bookshelf of all dress history scholars and enthusiasts and provides a wonderful insight into the complementary relationship of experimental reconstructions and archival research.

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