The Linen-Clad Body

Changing Meanings in the Broader Narratives of Health, Cleanliness, and Identity in Early Modern Europe and Later Colonial Contexts

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Trigger Warnings: Discussions of colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade

Abstract:

This thesis explores the evolving significance of linen in Early Modern Europe and its later role in colonial settings, examining how the fabric was intertwined with narratives of health, cleanliness, and identity. In the late 15th-century and 16th-century, linen undergarments served as indicators of social status, tied to both the labour of working women and the principles of humoural theory, which influenced elite hygiene practices. As European expansion into colonial regions progressed, the meanings of linen shifted, from a symbol of status and purity to a marker of racial hierarchy, particularly in the clothing of enslaved individuals. This study investigates the trajectory of linen, from its intimate connection with the body and identity in the beginnings of Early Modern Europe to its role in colonial trade and exploitation. Through analysis of historical records, textile artifacts, and scholarly works, this research reveals the intersections of linen with socio-economic structures, labour, and the changing conceptions of health and racial identity in the European and Atlantic worlds.

Illustration by Madelaine Mae Dack

Introduction

Linen undergarments in the early modern world operated as an extension of the self through the textile's profound connection to the human body. Linen, beyond its practical function, served as a visual indicator of social status and cleanliness and played a pivotal role in shaping the construct of whiteness. Moreover, the value of white linen, as a textile of significance during this era, was not merely a passive artifact but a direct result of working women's labour. Women were predominantly involved in the intricate processes of linen production and were the main workforce in the European laundry industry. Therefore, linen emerged as a symbol not only of personal identity, but also as a testament to the industrious and essential role played by women in the socio-economic fabric of the early modern world. The later importance of linen in the context of colonial industrialization highlights its integral role in the burgeoning Atlantic commerce connections. The status of linen, still valued for its adaptability and hygienic qualities, began to shift in colonial contexts as its role in clothing demographics evolved. In the 19th century, the demand for linen was fueled by expanding trade networks and economic forces, including a new market for lower-quality linen to clothe the enslaved. The labour-intensive processes involved in the linen market intersected with the realities of the Atlantic slave trade, which illuminates the entwined histories of linen, commerce, and exploitation. This study contends that the changing meanings of linen, influenced by the principles of the humoral theory in elite discourses, contributed to the broader narratives of health, cleanliness, and identity in Europe and in a colonial context.

Mythodology

Through my research into the early modern shirt and shift, I utilized the scholarly work of Kathleen Brown as a foundational source to explore the changing meanings of linen in early modern Europe and the textile's vital connection to colonial settlements. To add context to the humoral beliefs surrounding linen, supporting evidence from medieval and early modern ways of thinking was utilized, as well as texts examining textile markets in 19th-century colonial environments. Through the study of historical records, works by scholars, and an object analysis of a linen shirt belonging to Christian IV of Denmark from 1648 and a woman's linen chemise from 1700, this thesis aims to unravel the multifaceted dimensions of linen, tracing its trajectory from a symbol of individual identity to a key player in the global dynamics of trade, labour, and health during this transformative period in history.

The end of the War of Roses (1455-1487) ushered in the early modern period and medieval conceptions of dress adapted to the Tutor regime. Elite sartorial expressions began to emphasize the visibility of undergarments as the exposure of the linen shirt and shift were a way to show off the fineness of the material and assert one's social status. Fine linen was for the elite. Others had to settle for coarser, rougher linens. At first, men's shirts and women's shifts did not differ much. They both featured a knee-length boxy cut made of fine linen called cambric or holland. They had high collars tied with drawstrings, and bands at the cuff and collar with ruffles to accentuate the material.[1] The edge of the collar was ruffled to draw attention to the undergarment which developed into a separate accessory called the ruff.[2] The most noticeable difference was that the women's shift did not have the same side vents as the men's shirt did.[3] By the mid-15th century, the division of male and female underclothes became more distinct. The shift's neckline became low cut with a "V" opening with ties meant to be shown under the bodice, and large balloon sleeves reaching just below the elbows, while the shirt remained largely unchanged. Figure 1. depicts a man's shirt from c. 1648 that belonged to Christian IV of Denmark, while Figure 2. shows a woman's shift from

[1] Cecil Willet and Phillis Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes* (Dover, 1992), 36.
[2] Willet and Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes*, 34.
[3] Willet and Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes*, 45.

1700. Comparing these clothes demonstrates the differences between male and female undergarments that occurred during the beginning of the early modern period. The male shirt has little shape to it, long sleeves, and a high neck with ornamentation around the band and down the opening in the front for more elite garments. The woman's shift looks vastly different from the man's shirt. The sleeves are much shorter and fuller, and the neckline is slighter lower. While made in the mid-17th century, the shirt would have probably looked relatively similar if it was made in the 15th century, but the 15th-century shift bears much more resemblance to a male shirt than an 18th-century shift. The comparative analysis of male and female undergarments from the early modern period unveils significant stylistic divergences reflective of evolving social norms and fashion trends.

Figure 1. Shirt belonging to Christian IV of Denmark, c. 1648, left. Previously published in Cunnington and Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes* (London, 1951).

Figure 2. Woman's linen chemise, c. 1700, right. Gallery of Costume, Manchester City Galleries Previously published in Cunnington and Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes* (London, 1951).

Early Modern Health and Cleanliness: Humoral Theory and Elite Understandings of Skin

Humoral theory informed early modern perspectives on skin functionality—a key factor in the emergence of linen as a health maintenance system for the elite. This theory proposed that an individual's health and temperament were dependent on the balance of four humours—yellow bile, black bile, blood, and phlegm—which composed the human body.[4] According to this

[4] Craig Koslofsky, "Knowing Skin in Early Modern Europe, c. 1450–1750," History Compass 12, no. 10 (October 2014): 794, https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12195, 797.

framework, the skin functioned as a layer of protection between the external and internal and was important for the excretion of waste that the body produced.

There was a lack of standardization of health theory before 1750. The humoral theory states there is no concept of a standardized medical body, only specific body types and constitutions. The desirable equilibrium varied for each person depending on their individualized balance of humours. 17th-century medical professionals lacked a modern conception of the "medical body," but determined that the pores were essential to the skin's ability to absorb and excrete. According to Cartesian philosophy, this semi-permeable barrier existed as its own entity.[5] The body was understood as mechanical and functioned as the amalgamation of separate parts and had to be managed to maintain an individual's health and humoral balance.[6] The porosity of the skin made it imperative to remove the toxins which were excreted through it. As Kathleen Brown's research notes, it was believed that if the impurities were not properly removed from the skin, they would seep back into the body.[7] The solution taken up by the upper echelons of society was rubbing linen over the skin. This innovation for the early modern world was propelled into popularity through a mass rejection of bathing.[8] Before this innovation in the late medieval and early modern period, cleansing the body had prominent spiritual connotations.[9] Water immersion was common as a purification ritual at important times during one's life such as birth and marriage. Catholicism provided a structure for many Europeans to grasp the concept of hygiene as linked to spiritual virtue and impurity as synonymous with sin. Visual representations of contrasting afterlives testified to the suitable atmospheres for the purified adherents and the condemned souls, with the pleasant aroma of heaven juxtaposed against the unpleasant odour of hell.[10] However, the proper way to address personal hygiene was contested amongst Christians as cleanliness was walking the line between vanity and sin.[11] This shift from water immersion to the use of linen as a method of cleansing not only reflected changing attitudes toward health and hygiene, but also underscored the evolving relationship between spiritual purity, bodily care, and social status.

The idea that sweating out toxins is a throughline in cleanliness appeared in discourses even before linen became the preferred method of cleansing the body for the elite. Bathing traditions left over from ancient Rome incorporated ideas about the porosity of skin before water was seen as dangerous.[12] Public bathhouses were available in England after travellers returned from the East and local businesses adopted the "Turkish bath" model which tended to be brothels that also provided steam baths to promote sweating before water immersion took place.[13] Yet, water was seen by some as a conduit to exacerbating disease transmission. Moisture and heat would open the pores, allowing for the infiltration of external toxins from other people. This fear caused public bathhouses and steam rooms to be shut down to limit this contact with others in such a dangerous milieu. Beginning with informal warnings, by the 16th century regulations and laws prohibited these establishments in the name of public health, especially during plague times.[14] The body was seen by some as too fragile to handle these environments because of the porosity of the skin and several orifices which could let in the plague. Elite early modern people reassessed their hygiene routines as water immersion was firmly out of the question, and the body was in desperate need of constant protection. The solution was a tightly woven fabric that would be tightly tailored to the body so that infected air could not penetrate the body: the linen shirt or shift.[15] Since the humoral body was

[5] Koslofsky, "Knowing Skin in Early Modern Europe," 795.
[6] Koslofsky, "Knowing Skin in Early Modern Europe," 799.
[7] Kathleen M. Brown, "Atlantic Crossings," in *Foul Bodies Cleanliness in Early America*, Society and the Sexes in the Modern World (Yale University Press, 2009): 26.
[8] Brown, "Atlantic Crossings," 13.
[9] Brown, "Atlantic Crossings," 15.
[10] Brown, "Atlantic Crossings," 15.
[11] Susan North, *Sweet and Clean?: Bodies and Clothes in Early Modern England* (Oxford University Press, 2020): 30, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198856139.001.0001.
[12] Brown, "Atlantic Crossings," 19.
[13] Brown, "Atlantic Crossings," 19.
[14] Georges Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge University Press, 1988): 8.
[15] Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness*, 10.

deeply individualized, water was sometimes still used to treat some conditions such as kidney stones, jaundice, and congestion. However, generally this was seen as a technique to realign bodily equilibrium only for those with very unbalanced humours.[16] Cleanliness discourses were very attached to early modern conceptions of how the body functioned spiritually and then as scientific developments occurred, medically. The contrast between elite discourse and common practice is significant. North illustrates that common folk often bathed in streams and ponds, using water as a simple means to get clean. Evidence of this practice appears in criminal archives, where cases of stolen clothing during such communal washing sessions are recorded, leaving behind an archival trail.[17] These records reveal the everyday realities of hygiene practices that differed from elite customs, offering a glimpse into the lived experiences of ordinary people.

Expulsing waste through the skin's pores remained an important concept in personal hygiene as bathing fell out of favour in elite circles. Instead of water immersion, rubbing the skin became the favoured technique to remove dirt as the human body was seen as too fragile to handle full underwater submersion. The shift from "wet" to "dry" cleaning was achieved by deliberately rubbing the skin with cloth or by simply wearing linen undergarments which would create enough friction to remove the impurities of the skin. The woman's linen shift and the man's shirt became central garments to the sartorial repertoire of body care of the upper strata. These underclothes could be washed and bleached which differed from other materials that kept the toxins removed from the body stuck in their fibres, and so by extension, the materials would become infected themselves.[18] This evolution in hygiene practices reflects the cultural and practical considerations that shaped historical notions of cleanliness and the garments integral to maintaining bodily purity.

Linen Production and Women's Labour

The linen industry was upheld through the labour of working women who were part of the intercontinental laundry network. Their laborious laundering practices allowed for new arguments about whiteness to take hold in the elite European culture. The work of these women was intense and physically exhausting and as Brown states about laundering "there was nothing genteel about it".[19] Women were an essential part of linen production and maintenance. Their many roles included beetling, scutching, and hackling the flax fibres, plus spinning the fibres and upkeeping the linen by bleaching the material with buttermilk and lye.[20] The bleaching process consisted of leaving the textile in lye, leaving it to dry and whiten in the sun, and then washing the material for a final time. Buttermilk was used as a neutralizer in domestic Ireland and Scotland but is absent from industrial laundering records.[21] Bleaching was not the only task that the laundresses took part in. The time-consuming process was made up of many different parts including washing, drying, mangling, ironing, and spot removal.[22] This invisible labour of women was crucial in upholding convictions about cleanliness. The wearer's identity hinged on the laundress, whose own identity relied on the work she undertook and the skills she mastered.

The figure of the washerwoman was part of most households from the 16th century onward but is often overlooked in the historical record. The pay for domestic laundresses was low, as was their status if they were simple scrubbers, but they were able to improve their status as they gained new skills like ruff starching.[23] The identity of the independent female textile workers was later elevated by their technological innovations and lowered through the rhetorical sexualization of their tasks. Natasha Korda argues that the demeaning of washerwomen is related to the increasing threat these women posed, as they were

[16] Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness*, 10-11.
[17] North, *Sweet and Clean?*, 103.
[18] Brown, "Atlantic Crossings," 26.
[19] Brown, "Atlantic Crossings," 4.
[20] Brown, "Atlantic Crossings," 28.
[21] North, Sweet and Clean?, 212.
[22] North, Sweet and Clean?, 213.
[23] North, Sweet and Clean?, 232.

often unmarried or widowed women who were active in the marketplace and were living or working in groups of other women called "spinster clusters".[24] These women existed as independent earners and opposed dominant societal norms and expectations of women by taking domestic work and industrializing it.

The sexualization of female labour in general was common during this era and textile workers were no exception. Particularly, their tools were a source of humiliation for the women. Suggestions of the women "poking" and "pricking" with needles and hot sticks used to press collar ruffs led to innuendos about the phallic tools, and since these women worked in close proximity to such eroticized tools, they soon became associated with the erotic as well.[25] It is important to note that these women inhabited all-female spaces and the insertion of phallic innuendo by male authors was an effort to insert the intimidated male into a space where they were not welcome and felt threatened—asserting their male dominance. Independent washing services often operated in cities where there were large numbers of unmarried bachelors which contributed to the intense occupation and insecurity some men felt towards these unmarried women.[26] These distinctly female spaces were rare and there were often attempts to intrude into these places, often with sexually intimidating techniques. Male critics were perhaps intimidated because the women could satisfy their own needs with the hot sticks, but also because they were economically sophisticated people who were highly skilled in their crafts.[27] The attempts at overshadowing the identities of female textile workers as sexually promiscuous women aimed to mask their finesse and business know-how. Such discourse made the labour of these women invisible for a long time. However, as Brown's research into the importance of linen maintenance in transatlantic trade and colonial activity, the labour behind the textile is also elevated. The tools Dutch working women used dignified the status of the laundress over that of other manual labourers and allowed women to have an avenue to financial stability independently.

Conceptions of Whiteness and the Development of Colonial Industrialization

The understanding of skin developed in conjunction with European expansion into Atlantic environments and the rise of scientific racism.[28] Linen did not exist as a neutral object but functioned as a visual indicator of social status and civility. As mentioned, a vital part of female textile work was the bleaching of linen. Unlike other valued materials like silk, linen was able to be laundered and soon the whiteness of the textile became a reflection of the rank and whiteness of the body wearing it. Linen was maintained through rigorous laundering, but also through the craftsmanship of the textile including the fineness of the weave and the ornamentation of the material at the neck and wrists.[29] The importance of showing yourself to others as the ideal of whiteness grew as colonial activity increased and Europeans became interested in ethnographic and scientific explanations for different skin colours, and in doing so, placed themselves at the top of the hierarchy. Humoral theory colours–red, white, yellow/brown, and black–were adapted into skin colours with distinct boundaries. European Christians were white and everyone else was perceived as "dark" and simply othered.[30] Humoral theory heavily relied on outward appearances to infer personality and temperament, so these distinct skin colour categories instantly were attributed to what kind of person they were; the complexion became a reflection of the whole person.[31] One way to assert this hierarchical difference was through wearing linen shirts. Europeans viewed the undergarment as a marker for markers of "membership in the civilized world".[32] When Europe was making efforts to

[24] Natasha Korda, "Sex, Starch-Houses, and Poking Sticks: Alien Women's Work and the Technologies of Material Culture," *Early Modern Women* 5 (2010): 202; Olwen Hufton, "Women without Men: Widows and Spinsters in Britain and France in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Family History* 9, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 361.
[25] Korda, "Sex, Starch-Houses, and Poking Sticks," 203.
[26] North, *Sweet and Clean?*, 235.
[27] Korda, "Sex, Starch-Houses, and Poking Sticks," 206.
[28] Koslofsky, "Knowing Skin in Early Modern Europe," 795.
[29] Brown, "Atlantic Crossings," 27.
[30] Koslofsky, "Knowing Skin in Early Modern Europe," 798.
[31] Koslofsky, "Knowing Skin in Early Modern Europe," 798.
[32] Brown, "Atlantic Crossings," 6.

differentiate itself from Atlantic peoples, their status grew dependent on their proximity to whiteness, a category that was constantly changing and with new criteria.

As Europeans negotiated a new colonial environment, their conceptions of cleanliness adapted and strayed from earlier values. By the end of the 19th century, there began a devaluation of white linen, although their preoccupation with preserving white bodies was kept intact. European notions of health interacted with colonial environments through the adaption of tropical kits. Concerns regarding the tropical heat and sunrays were taken care of with much care due to the enduring anxiety about preserving white bodies. There had to be a distinction between colonized and uncolonized bodies, or the arguments made about the superiority of Europeans had no visual evidence. To manage the white body, Europeans developed clothing for the tropical outdoors that, instead of mimicking their own skin colour, imitated the black body.[33] It is still debated if linen was completely replaced as the most desirable fabric of choice and what that replacement was. It is generally accepted that mainly wool with a mix of various other textiles such as cotton and silk were the most favourable, but the local variation in climate across the colonized tropics probably meant that fabric preferences varied by region.[34] Where previously sweating was encouraged to excrete waste through the skin, the excessive perspiration brought on by the tropical heat was seen as the cause of health problems in the digestive and respiratory systems and disrupted internal temperature regulation.[35] By the late 19th century, humoral theory had fallen out of fashion as more scientific discoveries revealed the reality of germ theory. Still, humoral conceptions of skin were sustained to establish racial hierarchy but did not apply to general health concerns anymore.

Linen remained a major textile throughout the colonial regions, alongside the popular cotton fabrics—which were washed and assessed in similar ways. While other materials and textiles became more prominent over time, linen continued to be widely used, particularly to clothe enslaved individuals in chattel environments. The most prominent fabric for slave clothing was osnaburg, a rough and unfinished German linen. Unlike the fine white linen of early modern Europe, this was cheap to make and physically uncomfortable to wear.[36] The transition in the use of linen from a symbol of high social status to a tool for visually marking enslaved individuals is a poignant reflection of the dehumanizing practices embedded in the institution of slavery. Linen, both a luxurious fabric associated with prestige, also underwent a radical transformation. As well as a marker of privilege, it became a means of enforcing the subordinate status of the enslaved by making them easily identifiable.[37] Unlike earlier uses for linen, osnaburg was used as an outer garment for enslaved peoples. The fabric was made into loose shirts that permitted a free range of motion for physical labour.[38] The osnaburg shirt was similar in silhouette and cut to the earlier European men's shirt which was only seen before underneath other garments but was now transformed into the outer garment. The intimacy revealed by the metamorphosis of a private and intimate piece of clothing to one made for public spaces and enforced labour underscores the exploitative nature of the work these enslaved peoples had to endure. Using linen to clothe enslaved peoples expanded the linen market to colonial settings and transformed the local linen production industry and laundry network from a regional and local system to an international complex. In the southern colonies of North America, clothing theft between fellow slaves occurred, and they sometimes stole from white Europeans. But even more commonly, they were offered old garments from whomever owned them which was illegal under the South Caroline Negro Act of

[33] Ryan Johnson, "European Cloth and 'Tropical' Skin: Clothing Material and British Ideas of Health and Hygiene in Tropical Climates," *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 83, no. 3 (2009): 532.
[34] Johnson, "European Cloth and 'Tropical' Skin," 537.
[35] Johnson, "European Cloth and 'Tropical' Skin," 538.
[36] Eulanda Sanders, "The Politics of Textiles Used in African American Slave Clothing," *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*, (September 1, 2012): 6, https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/740.
[37] Sanders, "The Politics of Textiles Used in African American Slave Clothing," 6.
[38] Graham White and Shane White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture in the Eighteen and Nineteenth Centuries," *Past & Present* 148, no. 1 (August 1, 1995): 153, https://doi.org/10.1093/past/148.1.149.

1735.[39] An underground garment market was established to provide a place for slaves to sell barter and trade clothing.[40]

In tracing the journey of linen in the context of slavery, from its expansion into colonial markets to the establishment of an illicit economy, it becomes evident that the fabric not only clothed the enslaved but also wove a complex web of economic and social dynamics, transcending regional boundaries and transforming the very nature of the clothing trade in the colonial environments.

Conclusion

The exploration of linen's multifaceted role in the early modern world reveals a profound journey from a symbol of individual identity relating to the body and working women as essential contributors to the global dynamics of trade and labour. Perceptions of cleanliness were reliant on the whiteness of the textile which reflected the social status of the wearer and was only accomplished through the rigorous and time-consuming labour of the washerwoman. The identity of the wearer was dependent on the laundress and the laundress's identity was dependent on the work she received and the skills she had acquired. As cosmopolitan cities grew, a need for more laundering services grew also, which provided working women financial and social freedom from the androcentric market and societal constraints of matrimony. Later colonial developments expanded upon the established meanings of linen, transforming it from a symbol of social status in continental Europe into a tool for enforcing racial hierarchies and advancing imperial ambitions to grow the global linen trade. Notions of cleanliness and health shifted to service a new tropical environment that reinvented the cultural meanings of white linens but still perpetuated the need for pristine white bodies.

The journey of linen from a symbol of individual identity closely tied to the labour of women and personal hygiene practices in early modern Europe, to its role in shaping racial hierarchies and imperial aspirations in colonial contexts, underscores the dynamic intersections of trade, labour, and identity. The evolution of linen's meanings, influenced by humoral theory and shifting perceptions of cleanliness, illuminates the entwined histories of this textile with broader narratives of health and identity in both European and colonial spheres. The intimate relationship between linen and the body, as well as the often-overlooked labour of working women, reveals a complex tapestry that reflects the socio-economic fabric of its time. Linen's trajectory highlights how material culture can serve as a lens to examine and understand the intricate layers of history and societal transformations.

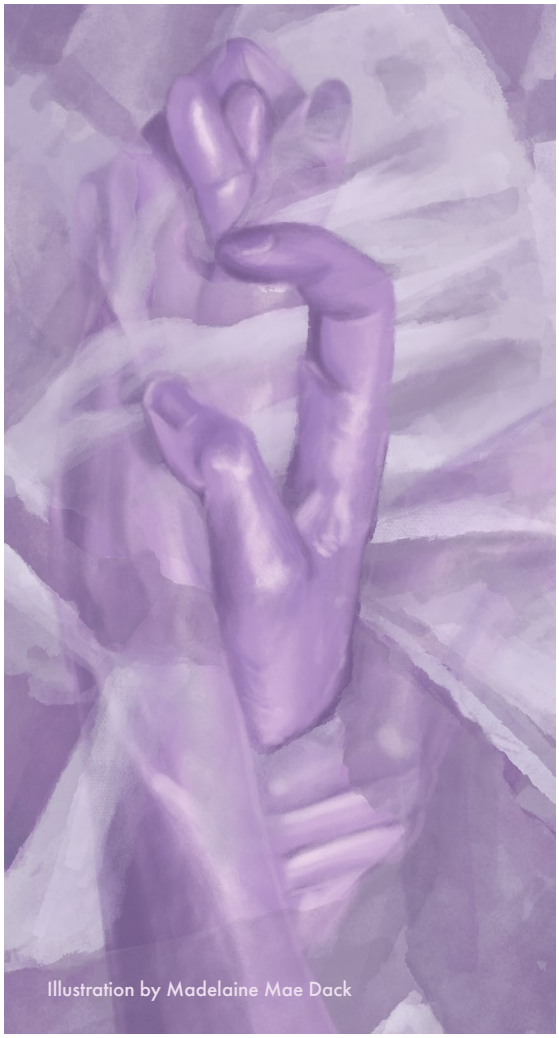

Illustration by Madelaine Mae Dack

[39] White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture in the Eighteen and Nineteenth Centuries," 159.
[40] White and White, "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture in the Eighteen and Nineteenth Centuries," 40.

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