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Elizabethan Underpinnings

As with all eras, the garments worn beneath the Elizabethan Englishwoman's outer clothes had a tremendous impact on the outfit as a whole. Without them, the popular conical silhouette of the time could never have been achieved, and the evolution of fashion may have been quite different from the way it has turned out. Because the construction of these pieces is so crucial, I have devoted half of my time this term to them. Here, I will discuss the history of the underpinnings worn during Elizabeth's reign (particularly in the early 1570s), and my experiences recreating them.

Elizabethan women, as may be expected with the sheer amount of clothing they wore, took a notoriously long time to get dressed. Contemporary writer Thomas Tomkis recounts such an experience in his *Lingua or the Combat of the Tongues*:

Five hours ago I set a dozen maids to attire a boy like a nice gentlewoman; but there is such doing with their looking glasses, pinning, unpinning... that yet she is scarce dressed to the girdle; and now there's such a calling for fardingales, kirtles, busk-points, shoe ties, etc., that seven pedlar's shops – nay all Stourbridge Fair—will scarce furnish her: a ship is sooner rigged by far, than a gentlewoman made ready. (Arnold, *Patterns* 3, 39)

However complicated the process, though, it always began with the most basic piece of Elizabethan underclothing: the smock. This was also referred to as a shift, chemise, or shirt,

though the shirt was usually a man's garment (Leed, "Smocks"). The smock was always made of linen, the quality of the fabric depending on the wearer's station. For the upper-class woman, it was extremely fine, sometimes even transparent, and often highly decorated. This garment served the extremely important purpose of protecting the wearer's outer clothing from sweat and body oils; the heavily-embellished outer garments would not stand up to frequent washing, and so instead had to be guarded in this way (Leed, "Smocks").

As is the case with any garment, there were several varieties of smock worn during Elizabeth's reign; however, all seemed to hang to around mid-calf. The low-necked smock was worn exclusively by women; it was cut in a similar fashion to the medieval T-tunic, and usually featured a square neckline (Leed, "Smocks"). When this type was worn, it was invariably accompanied by some sort of partlet, which filled in the neckline of the wearer's gown. The partlet was usually cut as a rectangle with either a keyhole neckline or an open front that could be arranged into an inverted "V". They had standing collars onto which ruffs could be attached, and were often heavily embroidered (Anderson).

Another popular variety of smock was the high-necked sort, which could be either gathered or more flat-fronted. Both of these would have been worn without a partlet, as the wearer's neck would not have needed additional coverage. In fact, "usually it is virtually impossible to detect the difference between a partlet with matching sleeves and a high necked smock in portraits" (Arnold, *Wardrobe*, 149).

The full, gathered chemise worn by many participants at Renaissance Faires is similar to both early German and Italian smocks of the early 1500s and the Irish leine, but was generally not worn by the English during Elizabeth's time (Leed, "Smocks").

According to Arnold, "[t]he decoration on surviving smocks often covers the neckband,

sleeves, and the area between the shoulder and chest level at the front and sometimes at the back as well” (*Patterns 4*, 13). This region was usually referred to as the square, whether on a low- or high-necked smock. Blackwork embroidery was particularly popular for this decoration, though designs in red, blue, or polychrome silk were also common, as were lace edgings (Leed, “Smocks”).

Perhaps the most well-known member of the set of Elizabethan underpinnings is the corset; it has persisted in its various forms for hundreds of years. However, the function of the 16th century corset was a bit different from the purpose it assumed later. Contrary to popular belief, the “Elizabethan corset, or pair of bodies, is NOT designed to squeeze the waist down to a tiny size, but to smooth the lines of the torso, compressing it into a smooth cone shape. The waist is not overly compressed, and the breasts are flattened, resulting in a high, mounded bustline” (Anderson). This molding of the body was very important, because it allowed clothes to fit properly. Because techniques like waist and underarm darts were not used until the 19th century, any shaping of garments occurred at the front, back, or side seams (Arnold, *Patterns 4*, 8). This sort of shaping has limited ability to deal with bodily curves, so the corset was used to smooth the body before attempting to clothe it further.

Both front- and back-lacing corsets were used in period, and one of each style survives today. Pairs of bodies were often stiffened with bents, or reeds, but a variety of other boning materials were also used, including whalebone (especially popular from the 1580s onward), cords, or simple quilting. Back-lacing corsets often had a busk: a strip of horn, wood, whalebone, or another material slipped into a pocket at the corset’s front for additional stiffness (Arnold, *Wardrobe*, 146-7).

The undergarment that most shaped the Elizabethan outfit, perhaps even more than the

corset, was the farthingale, a petticoat with hoops to support the skirts. Called “verdugado” in Spanish, it was named for “verdugos,” described by Arnold as “any smooth twigs put out by a tree that has been pruned” (*Wardrobe*, 124); clippings like these were used as support in early versions of the garment. Farthingales were often made of taffeta, silk, or linen and stiffened with ropes, willow bents, or whalebone. The conical Spanish farthingale was brought to England by Catherine of Aragon in 1501, but was not embraced by the English until around 1545 (Malcolm-Davies and Mikhaila, 21). Starting in the 1560s, women began wearing bumrolls over their farthingales, creating more of a dome-shaped skirt. This emphasized the hips, working with the corset and gowns’ pointed bodices to create the illusion of a tiny waist (Arnold, *Wardrobe*, 19).

As time went on, these rolls grew larger and larger until they became too heavy to be practical. In response, the wheel- or drum-shaped French farthingale rose to popularity in the 1580s and 90s. This was a disk-shaped support worn about the waist, worn with and eventually replacing the traditional Spanish farthingale and bumroll, though some women still padded their wheels with smaller rolls (Arnold, *Wardrobe*, 199).

For this project, I have attempted to recreate these Elizabethan garments with as much accuracy as is feasible. I have tried to use period materials as much as possible, but have made exceptions when modern alternatives are more desirable out of price, availability, or comfort in today’s climate. Machine sewing has also been used whenever possible, for time reasons.

After a lengthy internal debate, I decided to begin my outfit with a low-necked smock and matching partlet. This seemed to be the best option for me, since it produces less bulk at the neck than a gathered high-necked smock would; this will be especially important when wearing the outfit on 90-degree faire days. Both pieces are made of white tissue linen, with attached ruffs of white grosgrain ribbon (which, though not linen selvedge, is similar to materials available at

the time and does not require starching). The ruffs are machine-embroidered in black and hand-gathered into the popular figure eights of the 1560s and 70s. They were made from Drea Leed's tutorial on The Elizabethan Costuming Page. The smock pattern also comes from the Costuming Page, and uses period rectangular construction, which produces very little fabric waste. The partlet pattern is from Margo Anderson's pattern website. All seams in both pieces are either enclosed within facings or worked as French or flat-fell seams— all period techniques that will also add to the life of the garments. The partlet fastens at the neck with hooks and eyes, as was done in period (Arnold, *Wardrobe*, 150), and the smock wrists will fasten with either hooks and eyes or buttons and loops. Both options are period (Leed), and this decision will be mostly aesthetic. The smock is at present unfinished, as the neck opening must be marked following the line of the gown bodice, and the side seams cannot be sewn until afterward. The muslin version, however, is completed.

The corset I made fall term is probably the most historically accurate piece of the bunch; the outer fabric and lining are both linen, and the lining is cotton canvas. It is boned with reed and a wooden busk, hand-bound with grosgrain ribbon, and it spiral laces at the back through eyelets hand-sewn over metal rings. It was made with the Custom Corset Pattern Generator on the Elizabethan Costuming Page, and except for the use of the sewing machine, followed period construction techniques. I intend to add straps of the same material once the bodice is complete, and add more eyelets at the waist with which to attach the farthingale.

The farthingale and bumroll are both from Simplicity pattern 2621 by Andrea Schewe, which is generally regarded as reasonably accurate. Indeed, the farthingale pattern closely resembles that produced by Spanish tailor Juan de Alcega in 1589 (Leed, "Farthingale"). I made a few changes to the instructions, using French seams whenever possible and modifying the

waistband to enclose the raw edges. Both pieces are made from heavy linen, and the farthingale is stiffened with rigid plastic tubing, which is comparable to willow bents in strength, and much more affordable and easily obtainable than any period material. There are some problems right now with it twisting in its casings, but I plan to have that fixed soon. The two will eventually be fastened together with hooks and eyes, and the farthingale will be laced to the corset.

Work on this project so far has been very rewarding; it intersects with my interests and hobbies in such a way that it usually does not feel like work at all. I am very excited to continue expanding my knowledge on this topic, and to move on to constructing the outer garments, particularly the gown itself.

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