

Clothing and the Embodiment of Age Identities

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- clothes lie on the interface between the body and its social presentation
- central to the expression of identity

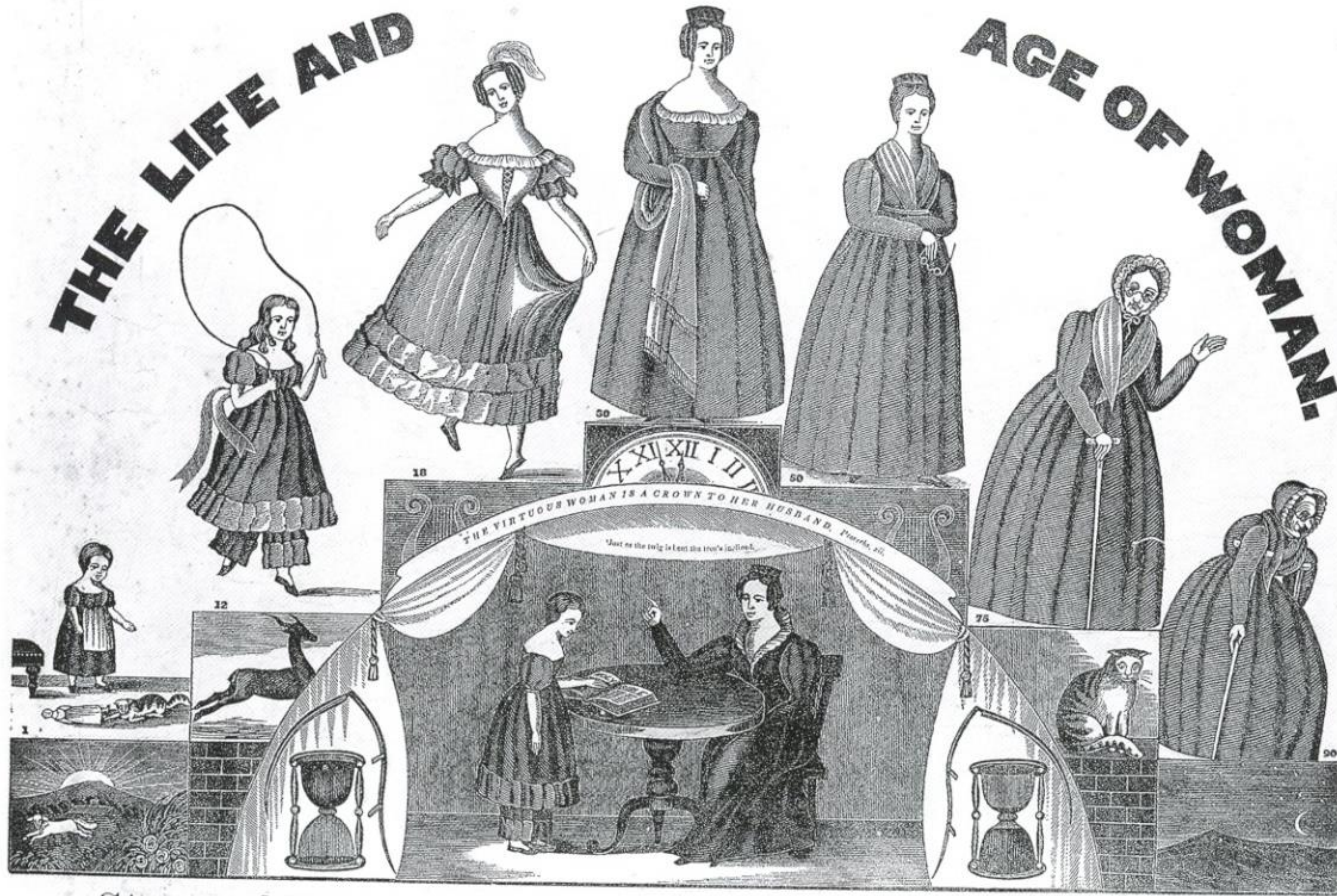
clothing and social difference

- clothes are part of how social difference is made concrete and manifest
 - we are accustomed to this in relation to gender, sexuality, or sub groups
- but applies also to Age
 - age needs to be recognised as a Master Identity

Age ordering in dress

- systematic patterning of cultural expression according to an ordered and hierarchically arranged concept of age
- clothes have traditionally been age ordered
- clear among children but also older people

- persistent normative pattern – though with historical specificity – largely expressed in negative form
 - more covered up: higher necks, longer skirts, looser cut
 - darker, duller colours
 - more sober self effacing dress, avoiding claims to sexual attention



THE LIFE AND

AGE OF WOMAN.

THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN IS A CROWN TO HER HUSBAND. Placido, etc.

Virtus est in fine boni.

Stages of Woman's life from infancy to the brink of the grave.

- interplay with changes in the body
- but within the context of wider cultural evaluation of age

dress as ideological

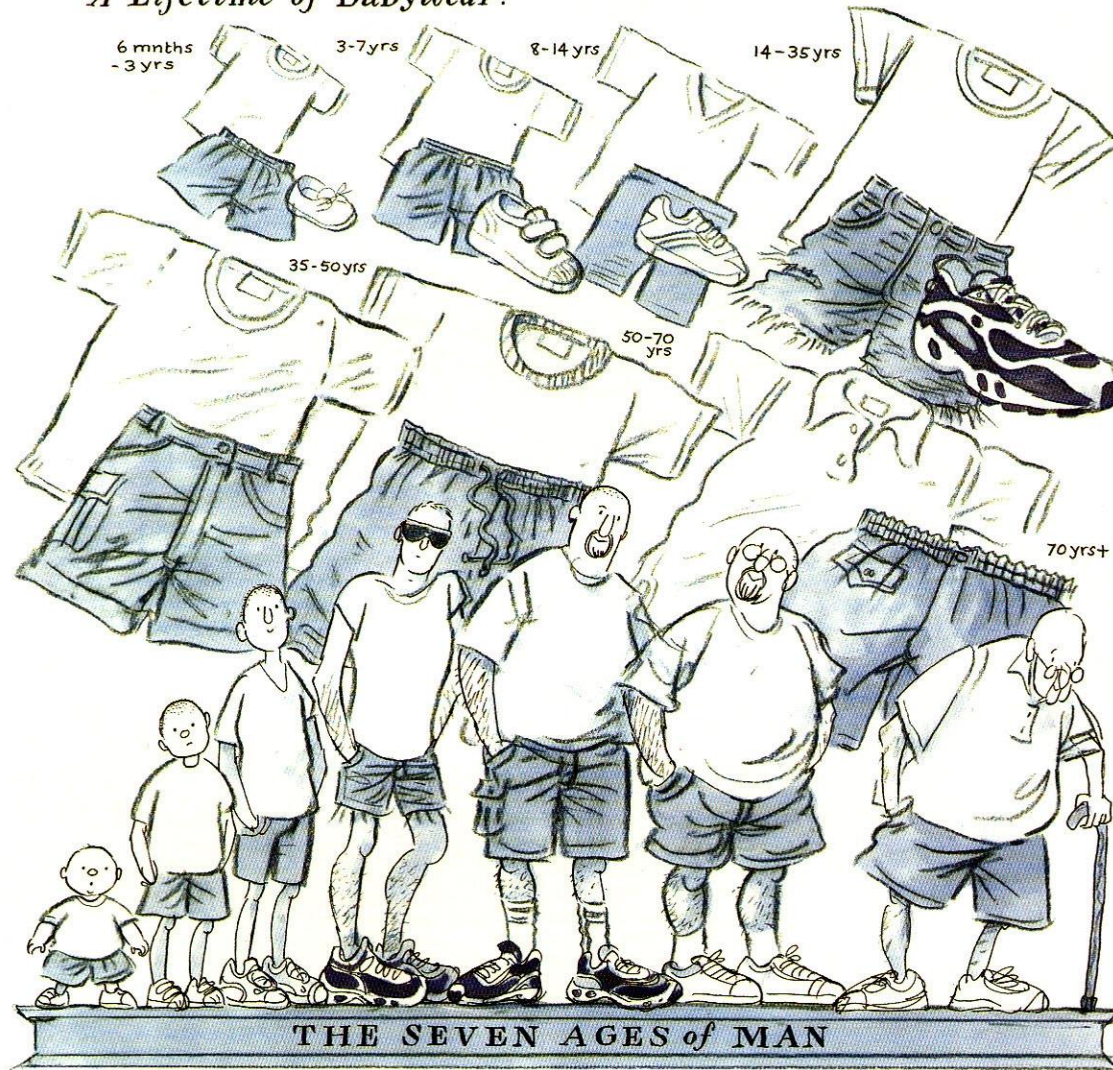
- Barnard:
 - part of the process whereby groups establish, sustain and reproduce relations of dominance and subordination
 - part of how these relations are made to appear natural, proper and legitimate

- aspects of age ordered dress that express this, suggesting subordination
 - self effacing, drab, don't look at me clothes
 - defined by what they are not: showy, attention grabbing, 'glamorous', bright

But is this changing?

- dominant cultural narrative today is that this ordering has gone or at least lessened

A Lifetime of Babywear:



THE SEVEN AGES of MAN

The main study

- ESRC funded study:
 - interviews with older women (55+) from a range of social backgrounds
 - magazines and interviews with fashion/editors of magazines
 - interviews with design directors of major retailers



Does age ordering still operate?

- narratives of older women make it clear that it does still operate
- expressed through a series of avoidances
 - exposing the aged body, which is presented in terms of Abjection

- *I wouldn't show my knees, because you don't show your knees after you're 50. Some people do and they look awful.*

- *I wouldn't wear a frilly dress [...] It would make me look silly. I'm too old. I would look really silly*

- *And they're quite pretty, the tops are quite pretty but they have these silly little sleeves that stick up. Well I couldn't wear anything like that, you know, your skin, crinkly skin. You can't. I mean you have got to hide yourself a little bit when you get older, otherwise you look yuck.*

Changed embodied identity,
or facing the wardrobe moment

*you look in the mirror and think, No [...]
That isn't me, how I am now.*

- a sense of exile from the cultural practices of femininity, even from femininity itself
- becoming invisible

But also evidence for change

- felt they are a different generation
- resistance to what they perceived as drabness of age prescribed dress

I say, 'What day do I wake up and I really just want a Crimplene skirt?' 'What day do I wake up and do that?' I don't think I'm ever gonna wake up and do that [...] I don't think our generation ever is. I think that generation's gone.[...] We won't change a lot. We'll still be in our jeans, and we'll still be in our tops.

- clothing retailers also believe there is change

*when I first started working, 30 years ago, there was a point in time when people, the majority of people, would switch into that way of dressing, into classic dressing, because they felt that was appropriate to their age. But that is gone. [...] This is a massive change, I mean it's a huge change in my lifetime.
(Asda)*

I don't think people who are in their 50s see themselves as being 50. They actually see themselves as being a lot younger. [...]
Our customer was telling us, you know, we might be 55, we might be 65 but we actually don't wanna look like grannies, you know, we don't feel like grannies in our head. We're looking for something younger, slightly more fashionable.
(Edinburgh Woollen Mills)

Fashion cycle

- older women are shopping more often for clothes than in the past
 - over 75 now shop for clothes as often as did the teens and twenties in the early 1960s
 - though not spending larger proportion of income: clothes are much cheaper. Part of a more general pattern

Clothing, dress and age

- enables us to reflect on the ways identities are embodied, and the interplay between social and bodily ageing
- way age is culturally constituted, and the significance of age as a social identity

- nature of later life and how the passage to age is defined differently in different cultural fields
- role of new cultural formations: consumption
- how gender, class etc intersects with this, reinforcing forms of structured advantage





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FASHION AND AGE

Dress, the Body and Later Life

BLOOMSBURY



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