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Elizabeth Amann, *Dandyism in the Age of Revolution: The Art of the Cut*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015. 228 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl.) ISBN: 978-0-226-18725-9.

Review by Sarah R. Cohen, University at Albany, State University of New York.

Elizabeth Amann's fascinating examination of the late eighteenth-century cult of the "dandy" might more accurately be entitled "Dandyism in the *Literature* of the Revolution," for it is in fact with the textual character of the "dandy" that she is primarily concerned. Incorporating a vast array of literary genres, from plays, novels, poems, and other purely fictional forms, to "reports" and reviews in pamphlets and newspapers that run the gamut from fictional to real, Amann's probing analysis of the character of the dandy as he emerged in print treats fashion as a political language wielded and parried by innumerable writers in three European languages. Her study will thus appeal widely to scholars of comparative literature and history alike. Amann argues that the complex implications of dandyism were fundamentally political, and inextricably bound with the progress of the French Revolution and its aftermath in the 1790s, both within France itself and in the neighboring monarchies of Spain and Great Britain.

In keeping with her political focus, Amann centers her study upon France in the 1790s, taking us through the various incarnations of dandyism, from the moderate *muscadins* who defied the Revolutionary *sans-culottes* in the early 1790s through the post-Terror *Jeunes gens* who sought revenge upon their former persecutors, and on to the *incroyables* of the later part of the decade, who used highly exaggerated dress to comment ironically upon the very idea of signaling one's politics through dress. The *incroyables* lead us to the *currutacos* of Spain, a more flamboyant—and one infers, more fictional—version of their predecessors, the effeminate *petimetres*. Amann argues that the character of the *currutaco* employed the strategy of extreme overdressing to parody Revolutionary paranoia regarding appearances, thus helping to defuse any potential revolutionary tendencies in Spain. Finally, Amann takes us to England, where the highly dandified "Macaronis" of the 1770s and 80s were replaced, after William Pitt's imposition of the Hair Powder Tax in 1795, by the "Crops," who deliberately sported wigless, shockingly short-haired heads in defiance of royal attempts to garner what was seen as yet another attempt to fund an unpopular war with France. Unlike many, if not most, of the other types of dandyism that Amann addresses through their textual representations, the British "Crop" movement was an actual, physical gesture on the part of such elites as the Duke of Bedford, who held a "cropping party" to protest the war. Regrettably, Amann does not address in the course of her wide-ranging examinations of the dandy character the relative extent to which any of its incarnations were real as opposed to partly or purely imaginary, perhaps an inevitable outcome of her honed focus on literary and semi-literary texts.

As an interpreter of texts, however, Amann is brilliant. She identifies at the outset of her book three types of reactive "imaginings" stimulated by the dandy character in various times and places: the "paranoid" imagination, always anxious about what a surface appearance might be disguising; the "catastrophic" imagination, which perceives the dandy as an alarming "other" to whatever paradigm is

currently perceived as politically viable, such as the Revolutionary *sans-culotte*, and the “anachronistic imagination,” primarily concerned with comparing and contrasting past and present in its evaluation of the dandy type. Employing these “imaginings” as an interpretive tool throughout her text, Amann ties together what might otherwise be an overly far-reaching examination, and also legitimizes her examination of the dandy as a *type* fundamental to revolutionary culture both in France and abroad.

Amann’s most important insight, for this reviewer, is unfortunately situated toward the very end of the book, in her discussion of Beau Brummell and the early nineteenth-century dandy most familiar to those of us in the modern era. It is Brummell’s dandyism that gives Amann the subtitle of her book: “the art of the cut,” meaning a way of dressing that deliberately “cuts away” excess as if to proclaim a deliberate lack of self-fashioning (while in fact employing the most sophisticated self-fashioning to be found in the history of dandyism). Amann interprets Brummell’s “art of the cut” as an act of defiance, emerging historically from the English Crop movement of the 1790s and its opposition to the royal Hair Powder Act. The notion that clothing and self-styling can impart significance as much through what is left out as what is put in is an important aesthetic as well as political insight and might fruitfully have been considered in previous sections of the book as well. But Amann is leery of any interpretation of the meaning of dress that is not explicitly political. Indeed, in discussing the spectacular getups of the *incroyables* of the later 1790s, she argues that their overabundance of sartorial signage, however well assembled, effectively resulted in an absence of any kind of meaning, that “fashion,” per se, cannot have any significance on its own. Fashion theory, however, tells us that a whole dynamics of desire, emulation, competition, and individual assertion operate within the constant play with surfaces that fashion entails. While Amann’s political analyses of dandyism are astute, this reviewer would argue that they are by no means the last word on what dandyism can “mean.”

A more serious problem with Amann’s interpretive approach is her avoidance of the politics of gender. Nowhere in her account of dandyism does she directly address the fact that this was essentially a male, even homosocial, phenomenon. Very briefly Amann acknowledges the way in which previous scholars, notably Lynn Hunt and Eva Lajer-Burchard, have used theories of gender and sexuality to interpret the phenomenon of dandyism and the more generally contested terrain of the clothed body in late eighteenth-century France, but she implies that such theory has no place in her politically-oriented assessment (105-6).<sup>[1]</sup> This reviewer is left wondering whether the political irony Amann so astutely identifies in the self-fashioning of the *incroyables*, for example, was not in fact bound up with the intensely homosocial aspects of *incroyable* culture. The same might hold true for other manifestations of dandyism, such as the *curratacos* of Spain. Occasionally, when the literature calls for it, Amann addresses female involvement in dandyism, but even here she does not appear to believe that such exceptionalism is worth taking note of and examining as a problem in its own right. Admittedly, were Amann to give gender its due, the book, already a dense read, would probably become unwieldy. But her implication that gender and politics can, perhaps even should, be separated when one examines representations of the clothed body remain troubling to this reviewer.

Scholars who specialize in visual culture know eighteenth-century dandyism best through its representation in prints, such as Carle Vernet’s portrayals of the *incroyables*; Mary and Matthew Darly’s Macaroni prints sold popularly in England; and Francisco Goya’s unsparing visions of the Spanish *curratacos* in drawings and in *Los caprichos*. Amann includes quite a number of illustrations in her book, and readily acknowledges how closely related were textual and visual print culture in constructing the various dandy types in the countries she examines. Not a single illustration is omitted from her discussion as she quite seamlessly weaves together the textual and the visual, although perhaps inevitably, the visual takes second place to the textual, given Amann’s primary orientation toward literature. This reviewer did miss reading anything about *actual* clothing and styles of dress, although Amann states clearly at the outset of her book that it is representation, not actual practice, with which her study is concerned. Setting aside the persistent question of how much of dandyism was “real” and how much was fictional, the absence of material culture in Amann’s book gives it a slightly abstract

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quality. This is surprising, given that its primary subject is how men in very particular times and places chose to wear their clothes.

## NOTE

[1] Lynn Hunt, "Freedom of Dress in Revolutionary France," in Sara E. Melzer and Kathryn Norberg, eds., *From the Royal to the Republican Body: Incorporating the Political in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 224-49; Eva Lajer-Burcharth, *Necklines: The Art of Jacques-Louis David After the Terror* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999). See also Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, "Nudity à la grecque in 1799," *Art Bulletin* LXXX (1998): 311-35.

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