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HIST 305: Women & Gender in Premodern Europe

Dr. Katherine Smith

Before you read any further, first glance down at your feet. In all likelihood you are wearing a pair of shoes; whether you're donning sneakers, platforms, sandals, or heavy work boots, your choice of footwear is imbued with a surprisingly rich narrative. Shoes can be thought of as utilitarian in nature, of course — they protect the wearer from the discomforts of physically navigating their environment on a day-to-day basis — but if that were their *sole* purpose, it would be difficult to appreciate why they are held with such high esteem in the world today. After all, multi-billion dollar industries are dedicated to the proliferation and celebration of shoe culture. The key to this success lies in our own vanity, as the alluring opportunity footwear provides to express identity through fashionable self-adornment far outweighs the weight of its strictly practical applications as far as consumers are concerned. The thought of a woman in high heels, for example, conveys a sensual identity that is starkly absent from the thought of the same woman in muck boots. Historically, the study of clothing in general has been a topic of academic fascination for this very reason: an individual's choice of outfit conveys both an outward (public) narrative of status, along with a more inward (private) narrative of self-perception. This is an especially useful approach considering that pieces of clothing are objects; they exist in a semi-separate realm from that of the written record, which itself is often subject to all manners of bias that can skew the intricacies of a given individual's own identity. Footwear in particular has thus served as an especially important source of archaeological exploration and subsequent academic discourse — while textiles often disintegrate long before they can be uncovered and understood, the durability of shoes relating to their very purpose corresponds with their frequency in the historical record since antiquity.

For the historian, then, footwear is an incredibly meaningful (and readily accessible) piece of material culture with which we may seek to understand the nuances of an individual's identity. Even before Roman times, footwear has held strong symbolic weight, representing the social standing and wealth of its wearer for all to witness.¹ By the late Middle Ages in Europe, shoes had evolved into a cornerstone of fashionable ornamentation, especially in circles where the practicalities of daily work and unobstructed movement gave way to more sumptuous priorities of conspicuous consumption and an appreciation for fine materials and craftsmanship, much to the disdain of the church. One particular style of luxurious footwear popularized in 14th/15th century Europe — a pointed-toe shoe dubbed the *poulaine*, otherwise referred to as the pigache, pike, or crakow — has inspired vivid discourse and critique among lay observers and academics alike for centuries. Indeed, this seemingly innocuous trend served as the basis for countless sumptuary laws, instances of ecclesiastical and moralist lament, and most curiously, heated debates over the female appropriation of masculine aristocratic fashion. Emphasizing the last point, this paper will explore the poulaine from several angles: first, we'll describe the shoe's form in detail, along with its historical origins; next, we'll unpack the shoe's symbolic relevance, with particular focus lended to discourses on its priapic styling; lastly, we'll underscore poulaines as shoes designed for men alone, from there unpacking social implications for the medieval women who invariably chose to co-opt the style for themselves. In doing so, this paper shall illustrate exactly how the ostentatious style of pointed footwear became popularized in late Medieval

¹ Marie-Josèphe Bossan, *The Art of the Shoe*, translated by Rebecca Brimacombe (New York: Parkstone Press, 2004), 13. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ups/reader.action?docID=915244&ppg=1>.

Europe as a medium through which the wearer could display both high status and ascription to various values of a masculine identity.

So, what exactly are poulaines? “Poulaine,” translating from a longer French phrase meaning “shoes in the Polish style,”² refers to a type of instantly recognizable pointed-toe shoes whose tips could extend from just a few inches to well over two feet in length. Typically reserved for the aristocracy, they were crafted out of fine materials such as dyed velvet, silk, and leather; the points could be left limp, or as was sometimes the case, stuffed and adorned with ornaments (one popular style early in the fashion’s life cycle had short, rolled tips sporting small bells on the end).³ This style of shoe has its origins in the 12th century (but did not gain widespread popularity until the 14th-15th centuries), as Crusaders returning to western Europe from the Orient brought with them various types of Hittite and Akkadian footwear with elongated forms ending in subtle points.⁴ A number of anecdotal narratives attribute the popularization of pointed shoes in Europe with the French ruler, Fulk Rénin of Anjou, who himself was a part of these wars.⁵ Suffering a foot deformity, he found point-toed shoes rather suitable for his condition, and soon the style caught on among elites imitating the ruler’s style. Regardless of if this story is true or not, contemporary English chronicler Orderic Vitalis records encountering the “pigache,” the earliest form of the European pointed shoes, at various points in his early 12th century *Historia Ecclesiastica*.⁶ It’s worth noting, however, that pigaches and poulaines were not exactly interchangeable:

² "Pair of poulaine (or crakow) shoes," Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, <https://collections.mfa.org/objects/122170>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bossan, *Art of the Shoe*, 24.

⁵ Lorna Richardson, "The Prescott Street Poulaines," L.P. Archaeology, last modified 2007.

<https://www.lparchaeology.com/prescot/the-site/the-prescot-street-shoes>.

*See annotation in works cited, page 9.

⁶ Ibid.

though both were pointed shoes, the former developed earlier and had shorter tips, thus making it still somewhat practical to wear when navigating the day's errands. In contrast, the latter developed in Eastern Europe (hence the attribution to Poland) before making its way through trade back to the courtly fashion of Western Europe, where the shoe's construction became more and more luxurious over the course of the 14th and 15th centuries as aristocrats sought out increasingly extravagant displays of fashion.⁷

The popularity of the poulaines largely arose from their ability to convey the socioeconomic status of their wearer. Part of this stems from the nature of medieval footwear as a whole — shoes were an expensive commodity to begin with (read through virtually any manorial roll from the Middle Ages and you will find many workers being granted an allotment of boots and slippers each season, for they could not afford them themselves). The price makes sense: quality shoes weren't yet mass produced, as they required the skills of master artisans to be crafted. This is especially the case for more involved and gaudy styles such as poulaines; as such, one's ability to wear styles beyond simple leather boots inherently carried with it the implication of a sizable expendable income. Even more importantly, Katherine French has observed that there existed an implied level of reputation arising from the amount one's clothing obstructed movement and basic tasks.⁸ Wearing shoes with extremely long tips was simply impractical if you had to work the fields, haul goods to market, or fight as a soldier to earn your income. And indeed, many learned this last point the hard way: for instance, the 1396 Battle of Sempach between Swiss peasants and elite Habsburg knights saw the latter so encumbered by their long-tipped, armored poulaines they

⁷ "History of Shoes," in *Cultural Encyclopedia of the Body*, edited by Victoria Pitts-Taylor, Vol. 1, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 211.

⁸ Katherine L. French, "Gender and Material Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, edited by Judith M. Bennett and Ruth Mazo Karras, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 200.

wore into battle that they were forced to chop off the ends of the shoes to gain back whatever small semblance of mobility they could achieve.⁹ Similarly, a fascinating 2021 survey of 177 adult skeletons (all dated to the 14th and 15th centuries) around Cambridge, England demonstrates just how painful and impractical the shoes were to actually wear. The study found that feet of the disinterred consistently displayed *hallux valgus*, a painful inward extension of the big toe resulting from cramming one's foot into the pointed toe box of the poulaine that would thus result in impaired mobility and a significant reduction in balance.¹⁰ The choice to don poulaines, painful as they may have been, therefore visually implied that one could afford a life of leisure spent navigating the tiled floors of a court, wooing the likes of other aristocrats, without worrying about having to engage in demanding physical work for your income.

Yet to describe the appeal of poulaines as conveying wealth and leisure alone leaves out their most potent symbolism: the pointed tip as a phallus, thus making the shoe a tool of masculine performance. Gaining popularity at the same time as the codpiece, itself an obvious attempt to emphasize the prominence of one's member, poulaines acted as another fashionable mechanism to convey one's virility. As historians Michelle Laughran and Andrea Vianello so eloquently describe, the pairing of poulaines with tight pants coming into fashion at the same time "allowed males to effectively display *three* phalluses... instead of just one."¹¹ This symbolism is further developed when one recalls the length poulaine tips could

⁹ "History of Shoes," 212.

¹⁰ Jenna M. Dittmar, Piers D. Mitchell, Craig Cessford, Sarah A. Inskip, and John E. Robb, "Fancy shoes and painful feet: Hallux valgus and fracture risk in medieval Cambridge, England," *International Journal of Paleopathology*, April 29, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijpp.2021.04.012>.

¹¹ Michelle A. Laughran and Andrea Vianello. "'Grandissima Gratia': The Power of Italian Renaissance Shoes as Intimate Wear." In *Ornamentalism: The Art of Renaissance Accessories*, edited by Bella Mirabella, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 259.

reach: various English sumptuary laws provided that members of the high nobility could wear tips in excess of 15 inches in length.¹² In certain instances, the wearer would augment the phallic symbolism even further by stuffing the ends with moss or whalebone, or tying ornate chains from below their knees to the shoe's tips, so as to hold them upright and erect. The wearer may even seek to invade the privacy of a woman with the shoe, sliding the symbolic phallus under a lady's dress with perverse implications, resulting in one contemporary Italian scholar dubbing the shoes "devil's claws."¹³ Whether a man chose to wear poulaines with short, unstuffed tips (perhaps compromising for greater practical mobility in navigating a town or city), or sought to visually dominate those around him with lengthy, taut tips, the inherent penile symbolism and related notions of masculinity conjured by the poulaine contributed in great part to the popularity the style enjoyed for over a century.

Of course, it would be an oversight to assume that only men wore poulaines. By the beginning of the Renaissance, women were sure to co-opt the style for themselves (although not typically reaching such exaggerated forms as previously discussed), and in doing so butted up against male-dominated authority with such an overt display in the public sphere.¹⁴ What's interesting is that, up until this point, there really had not been significant differentiation between male and female shoe styles; indeed, the only hierarchy of footwear lay in material choice — with fine textiles and ornamentation denoting one's aristocratic pedigree over a commoner's leather booties — rather than the form of the shoe itself.¹⁵ But because of the aforementioned phallic symbolism inherent to the poulaine, women's choice

¹² Laughran and Vianello, "Grandissima Gratia," 259.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁴ French, "Gender and Material Culture," 203.

¹⁵ Bossan, *Art of the Shoe*, 23.

to bear such ‘devil’s claws’ brought with it a distinct sense of unease. How could men assert their masculinity when their own priapic dominance was challenged by the fashion of the very women they may have intended to impress? Further, much to the chagrin of clerical and moral authorities alike, women’s adaptation of poulaines brought with it an unacceptable result: the shoe tips may very well extend beyond the veil of a lady’s dress, thus displaying the very existence of feminine feet (and subsequently implying the existence of other body parts beneath a long skirt) to the world around her.¹⁶ How scandalous! 14th century Italian priest Giovanni de Capestrano had much to say on the matter: beyond the fact that woman is lesser than man, and thus none of her ornamentation should be as audacious as her male counterpart lest she deny the order of the world laid out in Genesis,¹⁷ it was absolutely reprehensible for a lady to luxuriously decorate “the feet and the legs, those limbs most vile, placed by nature herself on the most inferior part of man”¹⁸ and which should always “remain covered for the sake of decency.”¹⁹

Luckily, we no longer cram our toes into points today — the trend of poulaines died out across Europe in the late 15th century, falling victim to a variety of strict sumptuary laws and previously described moral judgements that saw the style as wholly impractical, regrettably sinful and plainly overindulgent. Of course, poulaines emerged along with the broad beginnings of modern fashion culture, and new styles of footwear were bound to take their place. Next came *chopines*, also referred to as *pianelles*, a type of platform shoe with a similar evolution to their pointed counterparts: starting as a utilitarian tool, wooden platforms would be added to one’s shoes to navigate particularly grimy urban streets (a fitting invention

¹⁶ Laughran and Vianello, “Grandissima Gratia,” 260.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 262.

¹⁹ Ibid, 263.

for a time without modern sewers). Full shoes soon emerged from these designs, their popularity eclipsing that of their predecessor and bringing with them new avenues of self-expression — they added height to the wearer, brought attention to one's feet, and accentuated one's overall figure. Whereas poulaines were rooted in the male dominion, chopines quickly grew to an almost legendary status among the pioneering Renaissance women who wore them. As such, a great deal of Medieval gender scholarship has been published in recent years studying the proliferation of, as well as adverse reactions to, chopines — any reader interested in continuing the discussion of footwear's symbolism in the Late Middle Ages is encouraged to explore said topic further.

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 **Although this is not a peer reviewed source, I am arguing for its academic viability — the cited webpage was written by lecturer and archaeologist Dr. Lorna Richardson of the University of East Anglia, concerning her unearthing of a number of 14th/15th century poulaines during a commercial archaeological project. The dig took place along London's Prescott street, in close proximity to the Tower of London and other significant medieval landmarks. This article provides a solid amount of historical information on the proliferation of the shoes in England as a whole.