On 14 February 1613 London was host to the lavish wedding of Princess Elizabeth Stuart to the German Elector Prince Frederick V of Palatine. In a letter written by the esquire John Chamberlain in the days following the event he described the celebrations at the Palace of Whitehall in London, noting that during all the revelries ‘the [Great] hall was so full that yt was not possible to avoid yt or make roome for them [the newlyweds], besides that most of the Ladies were in the galleries to see them land, and could not get in...’ This, he wrote, prompted James I to proclaim ‘that no Lady or gentlewoman shold be admitted to any of these sights with a verdingale [farthingale], which was to gaine the more roome, and I hope may serve to make them quite left off in time.’ It would seem then that the reason many of the ladies could not get a glimpse of the newly married couple was because their ‘verdingales’ limited the amount of space available in the rooms of Whitehall, inconveniencing not only themselves but their male counterparts - including the king.

1 An early version of this article was presented at the University of Cambridge CRAASH workshop Matter and Materiality in 2015, and I would like to thank all the participants for their initial feedback. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers, as well as Julie Ann Smith and Laura Gowing, for their valuable feedback. Finally, I must thank the University of Sydney for providing funding for the materials used in the reconstructions mentioned in this article, and Georgia Blackie for the photography.

Farthingales were undergarments stiffened with kersey, bents or whalebone that were placed beneath the skirts of a woman’s gown to enlarge the lower half of the body.\(^2\) Although the farthingale had always been criticised for its perceived promotion of female vanity and sexual deviance, owing largely to the scandalous origin myth that it was first used by Juana of Portugal in the 1460s to conceal an illegitimate pregnancy, during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods in England those who criticised the farthingale increasingly focused on the spatial ramifications of its size.\(^3\)

Gender and space are at the heart of many discussions of the farthingale’s descendant, the eighteenth-century hooped petticoat. Contemporary satirists were quick to point out and exaggerate the size of hoop petticoats, and as both Kimberly Chrisman and Reed Benhamou have argued, in England and France many of these complaints were from men who decried the inconveniences that women in large hoop petticoats caused them and expressed the fear that ‘the hoop represented a female-dominated sexual and social space, which they could neither share nor control.’\(^4\) Amanda Wunder and Abby E. Zanger have also explored the seventeenth-century Spanish guardainfante, a hooped skirt similar to farthingales and hooped petticoats, in the context of France and Spain. Wunder has noted that seventeenth-century Spanish critics perceived this garment as causing ‘public commotion[s]’ that ‘threatened to undermine men’s authority’.\(^5\) Similarly Zanger highlighted the anxiety caused by the size of the guardainfante during the 1660 marriage of Louis XIV of France and Maria Theresa of Spain as it inhibited the ability to see the body of the princess and physically

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\(^2\) Farthingale is derived from the French terms vertugalle or vertugadin, which come from the Spanish vertugado. As Janet Arnold has surmised, this name probably came from the word that described smooth twigs on a tree, verdagos. Janet Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d: the inventories of the Wardrobe of Robes prepared in July 1600*, edited from Stowe MS 557 in the British Library, MS LR 2/121 in the Public Record Office, London, and MS V.b.72 in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC (Leeds: Maney, 1988), 195.


This article argues that farthingales influenced perceptions of, and prompted anxieties over, the gendered use of space in early modern England. It begins by outlining the three main styles of farthingales that were worn in England and clarifying the important roles that these garments played for women during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods - from shaping elite ideals of wealth and position in the court to defining status for upwardly mobile women in urban spaces. It will then evaluate the criticisms aimed at farthingales in relation to size and space by examining the materiality of the garment itself through a consideration of surviving visual and archival sources, as well as engaging with the process of experimental

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8 As farthingales are ephemeral garments, scholars often quote observations of their size (such as the Venetian Ambassador’s remark of Anne of Denmark’s farthingale in 1617, discussed later in this article) without giving much thought to the material reality of these garments.
dress reconstruction. In doing so I demonstrate that many of the surviving criticisms about
the monstrous size and inconvenience of farthingales during this period are exaggerations,
as the reconstructed reality of these garments does not support their claims. Finally, I will
examine the cause of these spatial anxieties to show that these concerns grew out of wider
criticisms of the farthingale, particularly in relation to its possible concealment of sexual
indiscretions. Hyperbolic condemnations of farthingales therefore reveal a growing unease
about changing social and gender dynamics during this period, which saw the morally
dubious farthingale move from the court to the city street, allowing women to visually and
physically consume more space. In doing so, these commentaries established a common
trope that aimed to regulate women in response to the perceived threat that their physical
consumption of space was challenging their gendered place in the world.

**Shaping Wealth and Status in the Court and City**

By the time that John Chamberlain composed his letter describing farthingales at the
wedding of Princess Elizabeth in 1613 the garment’s original style, consisting of an
underskirt in the shape of a cone structured by hoops that started small at the waist and
slowly widened until it reached the feet, had largely disappeared in England (fig. 1). This
style was known as the Spanish farthingale due to its origins in fifteenth-century Spain
where it was called the *vertugado*. One of the first references to this style in England dates
from the 1545 and describes wardrobe purchases for Princess Elizabeth, ‘*vij virg. Satten de
bruges crimsen pro una verdingale*.’⁹ By the start of the seventeenth century the two styles
popular in England were the French farthingale roll and the French wheel farthingale.
French farthingale rolls first appeared in England in the 1570s and consisted of large rolls
that sat around the level of the waistline creating a gentle curve to the skirts as they fell
over the hips, as depicted in the satirical engraving *The Vanity of Women* (1600) (fig. 2). The
next style, the French wheel farthingale, was the last major variation of the farthingale in
England and began to appear in portraits of courtiers during the early years of the 1590s
(fig. 3).¹⁰ It seems to have consisted of several hoops made from whalebone that graduated

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⁹ Arnold, *Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d*, 124.

¹⁰ *Wheel* is a modern term used to describe this style as there was no clear specific terminology used at the
time. However, the terms French farthingale, or simply farthingale, were common.
outwards from the level of the waistline in a wheel shape from which the skirts dramatically fell, and was, as thirteen year-old Margaret Hurdman claimed in 1597, ‘broad on either side, that I may lay my arms on it.’ These large styles of French farthingale remained popular in England until the 1620s when they disappear in portraiture; although small bum-rolls went on to persist throughout the rest of the seventeenth century.

During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries farthingales were used to shape and reflect ideas of the aristocratic female body within court spaces. The Elizabethan and Jacobean courts, as with all other European courts during this period, were theatrical spaces where courtiers were expected to dress extravagantly in order to display their own wealth, power, and position, as well as to enhance the magnificence of their monarch. Within these spaces, the courtly body, both male and female, was a ‘spectacle for its audience’ as court life was fundamentally a calculated performance that involved complex interpretive interactions between those seeing and those being seen. In this context, the female elites of England wore farthingales to show the high social position afforded to them by the power of their families. Of course, one way the garment did this was by increasing the size of a woman’s lower half and thus the amount of space that she consumed. In 1586 poet and attorney William Warner commented on the female fashions of the day in his historical epic Albion’s England (1586) stating that due to large wired ruffs, ‘Plumes of feathers fram’d’, and ‘Fardingales, above the loynes to waire’ women who were ‘near so bombe-thin… [now] crosse like seems four squaire’, implying that this fashion made women appear to have a very large and imposing appearance. This impression of the farthingale was still common decades after it had ceased to be worn, as in 1653 John Bulwer recalled that ‘women did take pleasure to weare great and stately Verdingales’, directly linking the farthingale with

14 William Warner, Albions England: a continued historie of the same kingdome, from the originals of the first inhabitants thereof… (London: Printed by Edm. Bollifant for George Potter, and are to be sold at his shop in Paules Church-yard, at the signe of the Bible, 1602), 218.
the idea of being ‘stately’, or grand and physically imposing.\textsuperscript{15} Yet these garments did not just increase a woman’s visibility in the court; they also made female monarchs and courtiers somewhat unapproachable, creating a physical barrier that protected them from crowds.\textsuperscript{16}

Wardrobe inventories reveal that the farthingales of court women were made from a variety of fabrics: from expensive materials such as silk broadcloth, velvet, damask, satin, and taffeta, to cheaper utilitarian fabrics like fustian and linen. In particular, Spanish farthingales required large amounts of often expensive fabric to make. One made for Elizabeth I in 1560 required 5 yards of purple taffeta for the farthingale and 7 ¾ yards of purple velvet for the border\textsuperscript{17}, while another from 1569, from a request to ‘John Bate fardingalemaker’, required ‘a leven yards quarter of blewe satten to make us a fardingale.’\textsuperscript{18} The most common materials used to stiffen farthingales were kersey (twill woollen cloth rolled into ropes), bents (reeds or rigid grasses), whalebone (baleen), cotton wool and, rarely, wire. Yet farthingales weren’t just expensive to make due to the lengths of the fabrics involved; a woman also had to be able to buy the amount of fabric that was required for the outer gowns to cover it. In 1557 a russet damask gown made for Thomasine Petre, a lady from the rising gentry, was listed alongside a Spanish farthingale of russet fustian indicating that these garments were probably made to be worn together. This gown required a staggering 11 yards of damask fabric at ten shillings and four pence (10s 4d) a yard to be made.\textsuperscript{19} Considering the average labourer’s daily wage was approximately four pence (4d) in the mid-sixteenth century\textsuperscript{20}, the eleven yards of damask (totalling £5 13s 8d) used in Thomasine’s dress would have cost a commoner nearly a year’s worth of his wages.

In the Elizabethan and Jacobean courts many of these gowns were also made from elaborately embroidered fabrics or contained threads of gold and silver, as well as precious

\textsuperscript{15} John Bulwer, \textit{Anthropometamorphosis: = man transform’d: or, the artificall changling historically presented, in the mad and cruell gallantry, foolish bravery, ridiculous beauty, filthy finenesse, and loathsome loveliness of most nations, fashioning and altering their bodies from the mould intended by nature...} (London: Printed by William Hunt, 1653), 541.
\textsuperscript{16} Zanger, \textit{Scenes from the Marriage of Louis XIV}, 53.
\textsuperscript{17} The National Archives (hereafter TNA), LC 5/32, fols. 100-106, cited in Arnold, \textit{Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d}, 124.
\textsuperscript{18} The British Library, Ms 5751a, fol. 79.
gemstones and pearls. In this sense farthingales were also structures used to display ornate textiles. This expensive display is visible in a 1606 portrait of Princess Elizabeth Stuart who wears a French wheel farthingale underneath an outer gown that has been intricately embroidered with popular Jacobean floral and insect motifs (fig. 4). Not only would this gown have required many yards of expensive embroidered fabric but the Princess also wears her skirts with fashionable flouncing, a decorative detail created by pinning extra fabric at the top of the skirt into the edge of the wheel farthingale. A gown which required these large amounts of expensive fabrics and trimmings allowed for the conspicuous display of wealth and consumption, thus making a woman even more noticeable in the socio-economic sphere of the court.

By the start of the seventeenth century farthingales were also becoming increasingly common sights on city streets in England. The play *Ralph Roister Doister* (1567) describes two maids to the rich widow Dame Christian Custance discussing the gossip of the streets and abroad, ‘And we shall go in our French hoods every day... In our trick ferdegews [farthingales] and biliments of gold...’21 This instance suggests that female servants, whose clothing often reflected the station of their mistress, may have worn farthingales. A probate inventory belonging to ‘Margaret Pyd of Sowthhampton, wetho, late dyssesyd’ that was taken on the 28 July 1559 lists among her possessions ‘a verdygalle’, indicating that some wealthy urban women had already begun to wear the farthingale in order to display their wealth, less than two decades after it was first recorded in royal wardrobes.22 Although it appears that Margaret was not titled, her will indicates that she was very wealthy, and possibly the widow of a prosperous Southampton merchant.23 Four decades later, Thomas Dekker’s play *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* (1600) confirmed why urban women like Margaret Pyd now owned farthingales. When her shoemaker husband is made a wealthy Sheriff, the character Margery exclaims, ‘Art thou acquainted with neuer a fardingale-maker, nor a French-hoode maker? I must enlarge my bumme, ha ha...’24 Clearly to enlarge one’s bum was a sign of their rise through the social orders of Elizabethan England. Thus, for wealthy

23 A debt court case from 1554 listed a John Pyd of Southampton a merchant as the defendant. TNA, CP40/1157.
24 Thomas Dekker, *The shoemakers holiday* (Printed by Valentine Sims dwelling at the foote of Adling hill, 1600) C3v.
women in urban spaces social status and, more importantly, upward mobility, were also reflected by the consumption and display of these undergarments.

**Four Feet Wide in the Hips? Confronting Spatial Criticisms**

Although the size of farthingales served to emphasize aristocratic notions of wealth and prestige in the English court, and increasingly began to reflect the growing wealth and influence of women of the urban elite, these garments continuously drew both puzzled amusement and criticism from contemporary commentators, most of whom were men. Take, for example, this description by a Venetian visitor to a feast given by Elizabeth I in one of the gardens of Whitehall Palace in May 1559:

The Queen having washed her hands, and being at table under her canopy, insisted on having M. de Mountmorency at her little table... At the large table all the rest of the French lords and gentlemen sat on one side, and on the other all the ladies, of whom there was no small number, and who required so much space on account of the [Spanish] farthingales they wore that there was not room for all; so part of the Privy Chamber ate on the ground on the rushes...²⁵

Although the occupation of large amounts of space was the prerogative of the wealthy elite, including female courtiers who inhabited vast court complexes like Whitehall, it seems that even in these aristocratic spaces these garments could sometimes pose problems. Just as James I proclaimed a ban on the farthingale at court events in 1613, other male monarchs also took measures to ban the farthingale from being worn, or at least, to limit its size. Such was the reaction by the French King Charles IX in 1563 who proclaimed in a sumptuary law that farthingales were not to reach more than ‘une aulne et demie le tour’ or 1.8 metres in circumference.²⁶ Finally in his frequently quoted account of Anne of Denmark’s dress in 1617, the Venetian ambassador described the Queen as wearing ‘so expansive a farthingale

²⁵‘No. 70, Il Schifanoya to the Castellan of Mantua (30 May 1559)’, in Eds. Rawdon Brown and G Cavendish Bentinck, Calendar of State Papers Relating To English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, Volume 7, 1558-1580 (London, 1890), 92.
that I do not exaggerate when I say it was four feet wide [1.3 metres\(^{27}\)] in the hips\(^{28}\), referring to a French wheel farthingale worn at court.\(^{29}\)

The physical and social logistics of cities such as London were, however, far removed from the court and the country estate, meaning that, as John Twyning stated, ‘the expression of baroque, grotesque, and extravagant styles took different forms and meanings as they came into contact with city culture.’\(^{30}\) Consequently, aristocratic aesthetics, including the farthingale, were caricatured in urban spaces and became the target of satirists in the cities. Writers such as John Heywood lampooned the size of farthingales and the inconveniences that they caused in close urban environments, as his epigram from 1562 jested that,

\begin{quote}
Alas! poor fardingales must lie in the street: \\
To house them, no door in the city made meet, \\
Since at our narrow doors they in cannot win, \\
Send them to Oxford, at Broadgates to get in.\(^{31}\)
\end{quote}

The narrow doors of London could not accommodate the expansive width of the farthingale and so Heywood jokes that women would either have to leave their farthingales in the streets in order to gain entry or go to Broadgates Hall (now Pembroke College) in Oxford. Here Heywood uses the play on words of ‘broad gates’ in comparison to London’s ‘narrow doors’ to make a point about the folly of women who wore farthingales in urban city spaces.


\(^{29}\) Several historians have cited Busino’s observation about the size of Anne’s farthingale when discussing Jacobean fashions, yet none of these scholars have questioned the accuracy his portrayal of these garments. See: C. Willett Cunnington and Phillis Cunnington, The History of Underclothes (Dover Publications, 1992), 51; Susan J. Vincent, The anatomy of Fashion: Dressing the Body from the Renaissance to Today (Oxford; New York: Berg, 2009), 72; Anna Reynolds, In fine style: the Art of Tudor and Stuart Fashion (London: Royal Collection, 2013), 42; Jemma Field, 'The Wardrobe Goods of Anna of Denmark, Queen Consort of Scotland and England (1574-1619)', Costume, 51, 1 (2017), 17.


Although ambassador accounts and literary sources proclaim that all styles of farthingales were exceptionally large and often cumbersome, taking their comments at face value is problematic. As previously stated, few female voices have survived and much of the literature about farthingales was written by men. No farthingales have been uncovered anywhere in Europe, except for one miniature sixteenth-century Spanish farthingale discovered on a vestal effigy in Spain. Yet an interrogation of the materiality of ephemeral garments like the farthingale is crucial to any discussion of size and space, and this is where experimentation with historical dress reconstructions based on surviving archival evidence, visual images, and understandings of other contemporary garments is valuable. Such experimentation allows historians to visualise the materiality of garments like the farthingale that are otherwise lost to us, and to evaluate the accuracy of many contemporary sources that describe them, in a way that ‘cannot be quantified through normal research methods.’

Janet Arnold has used a pattern from the 1589 edition of the tailoring manual, *Libro de geometria, Pratica y Traca* by Spanish tailor Juan de Alcega, to reconstruct the Spanish style of farthingale. According to her reconstruction the largest part of the Spanish farthingale, being the hoop at the base of the skirt, would have required 2.97 metres (117 inches) of bents. The resulting circumference of the base of the skirt would have been nearly three metres, but the width just under one metre across. However, determining the possible dimensions of the other two popular styles of farthingale worn in England at the turn of the seventeenth century, the French Farthingale roll and the French wheel farthingale, is more difficult, as no garments or patterns have survived. Of particular interest to this study is the materiality of the French wheel farthingale, as this was the main style worn at the English court during the 1610s when many of the events referred to in this article, such as the marriage of Elizabeth Stuart, took place. My reconstruction of this style utilises my own knowledge of early modern dress patterns and sewing techniques, and is based on the only known depiction of this garment in the French watercolour *Entrée des Esperucattes* (1626) by French artist Daniel Rabel, which captures a scene from a court masque held by Louis XIII

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32 This doll-sized Spanish *verdugado* from the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century has survived on a Spanish vestal effigy and is now in the possession of the Museo Etnográfico de Castilla y León, Zamora. Inventory No. 1990/050/065.
34 Arnold estimates that a hand span to be about 22.8cm. *Arnold, Queen Elizabeth’s Wardrobe Unlock’d*, 196.

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in February 1626 (fig. 5). My reconstruction of this garment is made from silk taffeta, linen, silk thread, wool, wire, and modern plastic imitation whalebone (fig. 6). It measures 79cm (31 in) in width and 248 cm (97 ½ in) in circumference. When placed on a model the reconstruction resembles the garments portrayed in Rabel’s watercolour and it gives a historically accurate silhouette when covered by the outer skirts (fig. 7).

Far from being a heavy or cumbersome garment, my reconstructed French wheel farthingale is quite lightweight and flexible, and allowed my model to easily sit down in a chair with a backrest and to easily walk through doorways (fig. 8). At a time when women often wore many heavy layers of skirts that gathered around the legs interfering with their ability to walk farthingales could be quite liberating. In summer the farthingale also kept women cool as the tailor Poldavy in the Jacobean play *Eastwood Ho!* (1605) tells the character Gertrude Touchstone, the ambitious social-climbing daughter of a Goldsmith, that her new farthingale ‘twill keepe your thighes so coole’ because it freed legs from swathes of heavy fabric.

It was often remarked in contemporary sources that the use of bodies (corsets) and farthingales together created an optical illusion, making the ‘waist so small’ and the farthingale appear to be much wider than it actually was, an observation borne out by this experiment. My reconstruction of a French wheel farthingale is much smaller than Queen Anne of Denmark’s reported 1.3-metre-wide garment, and yet it looks quite large as it is worn with a pair of bodies which tapered and streamlined the torso. The size of my French wheel farthingale also visually complements the proportionate size of farthingales in

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35 By the late 1620s it is unlikely that these farthingales were still fashionable in France. However, past fashions were often retained in court masques and theatrical productions.

36 Modern lightweight plastic boning, such as the type that I used in my reconstruction, mimics the properties of baleen, particularly its strength and flexibility.

37 Janet Arnold, Ninya Mikhaila and Jane Malcolm-Davies have all drafted patterns for a French wheel farthingale based on their interpretation of the sources available. While these patterns and their construction differ from my own, their reconstructions also measure less than one metre wide. See: Janet Arnold, *Patterns of Fashion 3: The cut and construction of clothes for men and women, c. 1560-1620* (London: Macmillan, 1985), 126; Mikhaila and Malcolm-Davies, *The Tudor Tailor*, 124.

38 Reconstructors of early modern dance have observed that farthingales liberate the legs from the yards of often heavy fabrics worn by women during these centuries. Marshall-Ward, Jackie, ‘Mode and Movement’, *Costume*, 34 (2000), 125.


41 Bodies are predecessors of the modern-day corset. They were sleeveless garments stiffened with thick fabrics, reeds or baleen that covered the torso and held the body in a conical shape.
artworks from the period. With the average height of a Tudor woman being 158cm (5 ft 2¼ inches) it is highly improbable that a farthingale of the French wheel style could be 1.3 metres wide in the hips as this garment would be nearly as wide as a woman was tall, something which clearly contradicts depictions of women contemporary portraiture.42

Further, when placing the Venetian ambassador Horatio Busino’s statement about Anne’s farthingale in its immediate written context it is clear that the size of this garment was overstated. After describing her farthingale, Busino notes that Anne’s ‘bosom was bare down to the pit of her stomach, forming as it were, an oval.’43 While evidence of oval shaped, breast-bearing Jacobean necklines does exist44, it is highly unlikely that the neckline of the Queen’s gown would have reached to ‘the pit of the stomach’ as a portrait of the Countess of Somerset, which depicts her with breasts nearly fully exposed, shows the neckline sitting around the diaphragm.45 Therefore, by placing this remark within the wider context of Busino’s letter, it was obviously an exaggerated description of her majesty. One then must pose the question as to why the size of farthingales seems to have been exaggerated, if in reality, these garments may have been much more modest in size.

Transgressing Gendered and Social Spatial Norms

During the early modern period relations between the genders were dictated by the use of space and consequently gender ideas played a part in the creation and reinforcement of spatial practices.46 As Merry Weisner-Hanks has noted in her introduction to Mapping Gendered Routes and Spaces in the Early Modern World (2016), early modern women often crafted their own spaces that ‘could—and were certainly perceived to—challenge patrilineal and patriarchal norms.’ Men worried that women were either in spaces where they were not supposed to be, or that even when women were in approved spaces they could not

42 Mikhaila and Malcolm-Davies, The Tudor Tailor, 9.
43 ‘No. 131: Horatio Busino’, Calendar of State Papers Relating To English Affairs in the Archives of Venice, 80.
44 David Lindly has argued that this fashion was not the preserve of wanton women, but actually common fashion of the court in the mid-1610s. See: David Lindly, The Trials of Francis Howard: Fact and Fiction at the Court of King James (London: Routledge, 1993), 11.

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oversee them effectively. Spatial criticisms of farthingales revolved around three distinct concerns: fears over the intimate and potentially uncontrollable personal space created around the female body, concerns over the appropriation of social status by upwardly mobile non-aristocratic women in urban spaces, and finally, that these garments visually displaced important courtiers, such as the king, in court spaces.

One of the earliest public denouncements of this garment in England was in 1552 in a sermon delivered by Bishop Hugh Latimer on St. Stephen’s Day where he stated that ‘farthingales’ due to their extravagant nature ‘are nothing else but an instrument of pride’ and that ‘I therefore think that every Godly woman should set them aside.’ Yet the farthingale was primarily an item of female under dress, and so it was also intimately associated with the female form and, consequently, the moral anxieties attached to women’s bodies. In 1563 a French clerical text, *Le Blason des Basquines et vertugalles* connected the farthingale with illegitimate pregnancy when it asked:

What use are these farthingales,  
If not to generate scandal?  
What good are your basquines  
Other than to indicate lust?  
What fruit comes from your adorning trickery?

The text’s use of words associated with sex and procreation, such as *‘lubricité’* [lust], *‘engendrer’* [generating] and *‘fruit’* [offspring], associate both farthingales and basquines, tight fitting under-bodices made from stiff material, with the scandal of illegitimate pregnancy. By the end of the sixteenth century these associations were well known in England. Stephen Gosson’s *Pleasant quippe for vpstart nevvyfangled gentlevwomen* (1595) which spoke out against ‘the pride of vaineuglorious Women’ dedicates three stanzas to the farthingale, linking it specifically to women’s sexual deviance, rhyming that ‘when paunch[s]

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of whoore[s] grew out, / these hoopes did helpe to hide their sinne.’ Yet Gosson does not just link these garments to the concealment of illegitimate pregnancy, he also goes on to say that these ‘hoopes that hippes and haunch do hide’ were not just invented for vanity and ‘pride’ but ‘When whoore in stewes had gotten poxe, / This French devise, kept coats from smocks’\textsuperscript{50}, attributing the invention of these garments to syphilis carrying French prostitutes who used them as a wide protective barrier to separate dresses from smocks or diseased women from the rest of the population.\textsuperscript{51}

Almost a decade later Gosson’s views were reiterated by M. Thomas Carew of Bildeston in Suffolk who preached that women ‘weare monstrous vardugales which as is saide, were invented by a strumpet to cover a great belly...’, linking these undergarments with the common tale of its scandalous origins once again.\textsuperscript{52} Therefore, the size of farthingales was often attributed to the supposed use of these garments to conceal the female form and female sexual indiscretions underneath wide hoops. Yet similar insults were levelled at women for wearing \textit{basquines} and then \textit{bodies}, garments that shaped and concealed the body but were not large or space-consuming like farthingales. Consequently, sexual immorality cannot be the sole explanation for the intense critiques over size that these garments received. Moralising voices reveal a growing unease over changing social and gender dynamics during this period where non-elite women increasingly chose to shape their bodies using these dubious structural undergarments, pushing the acceptable limits of their social status, and in the process, challenging their subordination to men.

Farthingales were not originally designed to be worn by women in small cramped houses or in the narrow city streets as John Heywood had joked, but by women in large estates with large halls, entrances and gardens. They were intended to project the appearance of occupying immense space and associated notions of importance because, after all, inhabiting large amounts of space was the prerogative of the elite. However, as previously explained, by the end of the sixteenth century farthingales began to be adopted by

\textsuperscript{50} Stephen Gosson, \textit{Pleasant quippes for vpstart nevvfangled gentlevvomen} (London: Richard Iohnes, 1596), B1v.


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enthusiastic social climbers, particularly in urban city spaces. Religious sermons such as one delivered by Nathanaell Cannon in 1613 at St. Paul’s Cross in London emphasized the ridiculous size of both men and women’s clothing in these urban spaces, preaching that:

For of what Nation and Country doth not your city borrow pride? and for your fashions as they are many, so they are monstrous: I would the Lord that when you goe to take measure of your wide and flaunting garments, that then your soules would remember the way to heaven which is said to be narrow, Matthew 7:14.\(^{53}\)

Just as the ‘wide and flaunting garments’ of men and women, particularly women’s farthingales and men’s breeches, were impractical for day to day life, they were also impractical for the size of heaven’s gates. The size of their clothing reflected the size of their inflated pride which would prevent them from entering.

City women in fashionable dress were frequently criticised as upstarts by moralising and creative literature from the period, which explored the changing social landscape of London where old codes were being replaced and ‘commercial venturing in luxury commodities’ had become ‘the individual’s means to wealth and social status.’\(^{54}\) Women in fashionable dress not only ‘aroused the connoisseur’s delight and the satirist’s scorn’ making them a ‘distinctive feature of city life’, but the anxieties about social fluidity they created are reflected in the writings of the time, particularly those that mention the farthingale.\(^{55}\) In The Shoemaker’s Holiday when Simon sees his wife in her new apparel he exclaims, ‘Lady Madgy, thou hadst neuer couerd thy Saracens head with this french flappe, nor loaden thy dumme with this farthingale, tis trash, trumpery, vanity...’\(^{56}\) Court records reveal that city women in sumptuous female clothing were commonly accused of being gifted their finery via their sexual indiscretions, and were often warned about dressing too extravagantly in

\(^{53}\) Nathanael Cannon, The cryer A sermon preached at Pauls Crosse the fifth of Februarie (London: Imprinted by Felix Kingston, for H. Roberts, 1613), 30. Matthew 7:14, ‘Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life, and only a few find it.’


\(^{56}\) Dekker, The shomakers holiday, D4r.
case their reputation be brought into question.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, while enlarging one’s bum with a farthingale was a sign of social improvement, the negative sexual connotations attached to the garment mean it was also associated with an immediate decline into moral disrepute.

Commentary on men’s hose and breeches focused considerably less on their moral implications and the space that they consumed and much more on their ostentatiousness and expense.\textsuperscript{58} One text from 1577 ridiculed men for paying so much attention to their breeches stating that ‘thereunto bestow most cost upon our arses, and much more than upon all the rest of our bodies’...\textsuperscript{59} While in 1583 Phillip Stubbes lamented in his \textit{Anatomie of Abuses} that in times past Kings were content with hosen costing ten shillings, While now ‘it is a small matter to bestowe twentie nobles, ten pound, twentie pound, fortie pound, yea a hundred pound of one paire of Breeches.’\textsuperscript{60} In fact, one Elizabethan sumptuary law of 1562 protested the ‘monstrous and outrageous greatness of hose’ that had ‘crept alate into the realm to the great slander thereof, and the undoing of a number using the same, being driven for the maintenance thereof to seek unlawful ways as by their own confession have brought them to destruction...’\textsuperscript{61} The legislation outlined the maximum yardage of fabrics to be used in the production of these garments, and, more importantly, it stated that the main abuse of rules such as these was by men of the ‘meaner sorts’ who were ‘least able with their livings to maintain the same...’\textsuperscript{62} These statutes, couched in the language of paternalism, reveal not only fears about social status being, or, in this case, not being accurately reflected by dress, but also fears over the economic hardships that fashionable dress could bring on those without the means to afford it.\textsuperscript{63} So while men were also labelled


\textsuperscript{58} Hose could refer to either the stockings that extended to the hip, or if described as upper, trunk or Venetian hose, referred to what would later to be known as breeches. Breeches were garments that covered men’s bodies from waist to knee.


\textsuperscript{60} Phillip Stubbes, \textit{The anatomie of abuses contayning a discoverie, or briefe summarie of such notable vices and imperfections, as now raigne in many Christian countreyes of the worlde...} (Printed at London: By [John Kingston for] Richard Jones, 1583), C3.


\textsuperscript{62} ‘Enforcing Statutes of Apparel, Westminster, 6 May, 1562, 4 Elizabeth I’, 187.

\textsuperscript{63} Vincent, \textit{Dressing the Elite}, 130-1.

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as vain and attempts made to curve their appropriation of social status, condemnations over the size of men’s hose and breeches were more about regulating social status through maintaining financial stability, rather than criticising their sexual morality and their consumption of space.  

As Doreen Massey has argued, ‘particular ways of thinking about space and place are tied up with, both directly and indirectly, particular social constructions of gender relations.’ During the early modern period relations between the genders were dictated by the use of space and consequently gender ideas helped to play a part in the creation and reinforcement of spatial practices. In particular, as both Gillian Rose and Laura Gowing suggest, women were often aware that they embodied space with a sense that it was not their own, particularly in ‘an urban environment where space and territory were so hotly contested’, and this was a ‘key experience of feminine subjectivity.’ Unlike men who wore large breeches that signified a possibility of real wealth or status which entitled them to consume large amounts of space, women who inhabited large farthingales did so not because it reflected their own status, but rather the status granted to them by their husbands or male relatives. This acknowledgement of female spatial subjectivity, and the unease over social mobility reflected by fashionable dress, combined with the fact that presence of fashionable women in certain urban spaces ‘could be readily construed as disorderly’, reveals why so many concerned voices, particularly male, arose at the beginning of the seventeenth century in relation to the size of farthingales. Not only did moralists have to share their cramped urban space with monstrously enlarged women of the aristocracy, but now they were forced to do the same with some women of lower social rank whose spatial claims using morally ambiguous garments were often larger than their gender and their social status. This was made explicit in the same sermon delivered by M. Thomas Carew in 1603 that mentioned the sexually immorality of the farthingale, going on to state that the wearing of ‘monstrous vardugales’ by women ‘requires more stuffe, and

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64 Fears were also voiced over status and the costs of farthingales during this period in relation to size; however, these were almost always linked to ideas of vanity and space in ways that men’s clothing was not.  
65 Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender*, 2.  
67 Gowing, “The freedom of the streets”, 131; Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: the limits of geographical knowledge* (Minneapolis; University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 146.  
68 Women who did frequent the streets often fell into one of three main categories: prostitutes, gossips or scolds. Gowing, “The freedom of the streets”, 131.
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palace of Whitehall would have provided more than enough room to accommodate them.\textsuperscript{74} Yet certain spaces within these buildings were still male dominated, particularly those such as reception halls where public events, such as weddings, took place.\textsuperscript{75} In a later history of the event it was suggested that the reason for James I’s dismissal of farthingales at his daughter’s wedding was because ‘this impertinent garment took up all the room in his court.’\textsuperscript{76} Certainly it is possible that some male monarchs felt displaced by their fashionable female courtiers. In portraits of James I and his wife, Anne of Denmark, the latter with her farthingale drew much visual attention, and in terms of physical space, the body created by this undergarment dominated the figure of her husband. This is demonstrated quite clearly in an engraving by Renold Elstrack, where it is the imposing farthingale clad figure of Anne - not James - that draws the visual attention of the viewer (fig. 11). Not only is the queen larger but she consumes more space in the portrait than him, flipping traditional gender norms and making the king both visually and physically subordinate to her.\textsuperscript{77}

As many scholars who have examined this wedding have noted, these celebrations were some of the greatest public events in the reign of James I, a momentous political and artistic achievement designed to impart a statement of power from the King on both domestic and foreign policy.\textsuperscript{78} The wedding was therefore not only a celebration of the joining of two royal Protestant families, but also a reflection of the strength of the English monarchy and of James I as its figurehead. Yet in Chamberlain’s letter and other widely circulated descriptions of the celebrations, the King and even Princess Elizabeth are, as Kevin Curran has noted, ‘entirely disempowered, scripted instead as passive spectators to a fiction.

\textsuperscript{74} A French wheel farthingale with measurements only slightly larger than my own reconstruction (79 cm wide and 248 cm in circumference) would measure approximately 0.49 square metres. The Great Hall at Whitehall was roughly 252 metres squared (12 metres wide and 21 metres long). This means that, theoretically, the Great Hall could accommodate roughly 514 farthingale-wearing women (without men). ‘Whitehall Palace: Buildings’, in eds. Montagu H Cox and Philip Norman, \textit{Survey of London: Volume 13, St Margaret, Westminster, Part II: Whitehall I} (London, 1930), 41-115. Hosted by British History Online <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol13/pt2/pp41-115> (accessed 15 September 2017).

\textsuperscript{75} Vincent, \textit{Dressing the Elite}, 137.

\textsuperscript{76} Agnes Strickland, \textit{Lives of the Queens of England From the Norman Conquest, Vol. IV} (London: Bell & Daldy, York Street, Covent Garden, 1872), 122.

\textsuperscript{77} Aileen Ribeiro makes a similar comparison between the King and Queen in her analysis of the etching. Aileen Ribeiro, \textit{Fashion and Fiction: Dress in Art and Literature in Stuart England} (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2005), 22.

outside their control.\textsuperscript{79} Kevin Chovanex further commented on the ways that James I and his court tried to ‘maintain strict control over the [wedding] ceremony and celebrations.’\textsuperscript{80} Therefore, taking into consideration the reality of farthingales, the gendering of certain court spaces, and the significant personal political meanings attached to these wedding celebrations by James I, as well as the ambivalent morality of the farthingale, a less credulous interpretation of Chamberlain’s letter emerges. Rather than women actually taking up too much space in rooms such as the Great Hall, which was large enough to cater to both female and male courtiers, the spectacle of ostentatious women in large farthingales detracted from not only James’ person, but the message of power and authority he wished to portray. Rather than enhancing the magnificence of his court, it appears that for James I, farthingales, and the size of the women who wore them, detracted from it.

\textit{Conclusion}

The proclamation by James I in 1613 was ultimately in vain, as it was not his disapproval of the farthingale but rather the inevitable change in European court tastes that led to the demise of the garment in England around 1620. However, the exaggerated descriptions of farthingales, as well as the attempts by moralists and court figures to limit their size and therefore the space women consumed, reveal fascinating insights into how the dressed bodies of women were expected to occupy space in early modern England. Although farthingales served important functions for women in both court and urban spaces during the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, particularly regarding visual projections of social status and wealth, the size and inconveniences of farthingales were continuously reiterated. Certainly, farthingales did increase the size of a woman’s lower half and influenced the ways that she moved through spaces. Yet the claims that these garments often reached sizes of nearly one and a half metres wide and that they could displace other courtiers in large palace complexes are just simply not supported by the reconstructed materiality of the garments themselves.

\textsuperscript{79} Curran, ‘James I and fictional authority’, 54.
\textsuperscript{80} Chovanex, ‘The British Pharaoh?’, 392.
Rather than accepting comically supersized skirts as a common historical reality, criticisms of the size of farthingales should be understood in relation to the long running spatial anxieties that framed these garments as not only vain and frivolous due to their size, but morally ambiguous due to their association with prostitution, hidden venereal disease, and concealed illegitimate pregnancy. These anxieties, which had been exploited by satirists and moralists since the introduction of the farthingale at the start of the sixteenth century, were reframed in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods to continue to criticise not only court women for allegedly visually displacing men, but also to condemn upwardly mobile city women for taking up too much space in the urban streets. Therefore, commentary regarding the monstrous size of farthingales, such as Chamberlain’s criticism of the garment at the wedding of Elizabeth Stuart in 1613, are reflective of a growing unease about changing social and gender dynamics of the period. This unease blamed the morally dubious farthingale for allowing more women than ever before to consume more space than ever before and, in doing so, to challenge the visual hierarchical norms of gender and social status in early modern England.
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