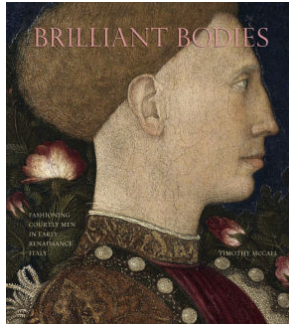


TIMOTHY MCCALL, *BRILLIANT BODIES. FASHIONING COURTLY MEN IN EARLY RENAISSANCE ITALY*

University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press,
2022, 240 pages with 36 color and 50 b/w ill.,
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Reviewed by
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In the opening sequence of Stephen Frears 1988 cinematographic costume drama *Dangerous Liaisons*, set in eighteenth-century France, we see the two protagonists, the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont, readying themselves for an impending contest of wits and wills that is to end in open warfare. Attended by servants, they are each strapped into their courtly “armour”: chemise and shirt, dress and coat, puffs of powder, wigs, and hats. Their battle gear does not consist of steel plate and weaponry, but of an attire that conforms to etiquette, just as their duel does not take place in a fencing ground, but in an arena of courtly customs, where the outcome is to be determined by how far each of them dares to stretch, twist, and bend the rules and can afford to be seen doing so.

Frears’s ingenious visualisation of the preparations for the fight highlights, among other things, how the detail of the male aristocrat’s *tenuë* is fussed over with equal attention to that of his female counterpart. This sartorial equivalence between the sexes, which are subjected to similar regiments of propriety, was to erode gradually in the centuries after the *Ancien Régime* that is being rendered here in film. For an eighteenth-century audience, the relative equal-

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ity of the male and female morning rituals shown by Frears would have been a matter of course, while by the early twenty-first century, it has become a trope of romantic comedies that women take forever to dress up for an evening out while men in T-shirt or at best jacket over jeans are impatiently tapping their watches.

The difference in attention to appearance between men and women has become a new, if perhaps temporary, normative system in western society. For us living in this system, it may be a challenge to realise that of all the persistent forms of gender disparity, this one has increased rather than decreased in the era of women's emancipation, and is probably, in world cultural history, an exception rather than a common feature. It is perhaps only in our current clothing climate that the publication of a book such as Timothy McCall's *Brilliant Bodies*, lavishly produced by Pennsylvania University Press, fully makes sense (and if one were really picky, only in a context shaped by northern-European Protestantism; I have a very traditionally masculine Greek cousin who never travels with fewer than two large suitcases with sets of clothes for various occasions).

The principal subject of McCall's book is masculine (self-)fashioning, corporeally as well as in clothes, not among the French aristocracy of the Rococo period, but among Italian courtiers of the Early Renaissance. And the message that is presented throughout its pages is that there was no such thing as smart casual for the noblemen of fifteenth-century Italy. In public (and with the relative openness of palaces at the time, "public" ranged further than we might appreciate today), their bodies and costumes were the subject of constant scrutiny, and both were fine-tuned to express wealth, status, and authority in every aspect.

McCall has devoted different chapters to different facets of visual deportment, including armour and luxury fabrics, jewellery, body shape, and hair and skin colour. There are common strands that run through each of these sections. The first of these concerns the fact that, contrary to the societal cliché of today, men of means were highly fashion conscious. So much so, that in an anecdote already anticipated in the introduction and then narrated in full in Chapter 1, Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza of Milan, in 1476, became an easy prey for an assassin having refused to wear a cuirass that he felt made him look fat. McCall, who writes well and with humour, calls him a "(proto)martyr for fashion and a veritable Renaissance fashion victim" (p. 27; it is somewhat of a let-down when one page later, we learn that with fourteen stab wounds, perhaps even from a poisoned dagger, the self-conscious duke might well have perished even if he had kept the detested piece of protection on).

A second thread that, as in a brocaded textile weave, keeps surfacing, is that male finery of the fifteenth century was conspicuously shiny. This is another aspect of past fashion that differs from the dominant western trend of our own time. Even though behaviour is shifting, for many of us, sequins continue to be considered girly, male jewellery is often limited to a single understated earring,

and even a regular suit of material that is reflective may well be thought of as tacky. At the Early Renaissance court, however, men gilded their suits of armour, preferred to be seen in priceless fabrics where the sheen of velvet and satin was rivalled by the sparkle of gold-thread patterning, and sported abundant rings, pedants, and badges of precious metal studded with pearls and gems. The primary purpose of all this ostentation was of course the underlining of economic might – a precedent, within its own parameters, of what the Marxist thinker Thorstein Veblen would much later, and for a very different civilisation, dub “conspicuous consumption”: the deliberate demonstration of a purchase power that outstripped the functional budget of the common people. McCall, while acknowledging the flaunting of wealth, also emphasises the metaphorical radiance of the ruler that was expressed in this literal way.

A third and final recurring theme is that men of the fifteenth century liked to show off their bodies through their clothes. McCall is keen to contrast this again with customs of the present day, when the revealing of underlying anatomy through material and tailoring is more prominent in women’s dress than in men’s. It should be said, though, that the preoccupation with body shape in general is an area where our genders may have started to draw more level now that there is increasing pressure on men to spend hours pumping iron in the gym and males unable to comply with such a fitness regime can even buy fake abs to simulate a six-pack under a tight T-shirt. The greater distance from the fifteenth century is in the type of male body that is being idolised. Whereas our own male ideal is decidedly Herculean, stimulated by the popularity of body-builder film actors, the fifteenth-century public admired male muscularity in a slenderer package, closer to what we might associate with a ballet dancer. McCall reminds us repeatedly, and with a noticeable fondness of the adjective “svelte”, that male outfits of the time put a marked emphasis on shapely legs.

Many of McCall’s observations have of course been made before in literature on Renaissance fashion, from Rosita Levi Pisetsky’s monumental *Storia del costume in Italia* to Jacqueline Herald’s *Renaissance Dress in Italy 1400–1500* and beyond. Not all the relevant literature seems always to be acknowledged. Given that *Brilliant Bodies* has a significant section on luxury armour, it is odd that Marina Belozerskaya’s *Rethinking the Renaissance* is in the bibliography, but her 2006 *Luxury Arts of the Renaissance*, with its extensive discussion of armour, is not. Similarly, Lisa Monnas’s 2008 *Merchants, Princes, and Painters* touches upon many of the same themes of glitter in costume as a status symbol, but is not cited. Nonetheless, these omissions should not take away from McCall’s contribution by devoting a study specifically to masculine appearance and attire and underlining how much this was part of the overall construction of princely identity in the era when Galeazzo Maria Sforza ruled over Milan. His book brings together a wealth of source material that shimmers as richly as the costumes to which it refers.

That said, *Brilliant Bodies* is not entirely as flawless as the visage of a fifteenth-century nobleman was supposed to be. One could argue that the book is overly long for the principal message that it is trying to convey. At the same time, while purportedly covering the Italian peninsula, an ambition that is effectively narrowed down to the courts of Northern Italy in the introduction, the main case studies are practically limited to the Sforza in Milan and the Este in Ferrara, with a few other rulers mentioned more in passing, and the aspiring court of the Medici in Florence thrown in for comparison. This is not a problem per se, but there are points where one wonders if a more targeted study on Sforza Milan or courtly culture as portrayed in Borso de'Este's frescoes commissioned for the great hall of the Palazzo Schifanoia might not have been equally or more effective for discussing the same ideas. The book includes digressions about female dress the relevance of which is not always self-evident, and a section about the predilection for black servants and the appreciation for their skin tone feels a little as if it is a moral justification for writing about a period when a blanched complexion and blonde hair were unabashedly held up as the standard worth striving for. Due to McCall's talent for finding catchy source texts, these passages have plenty of interest, but one cannot escape the sense that they would warrant books in their own right.

Perhaps the greatest issue with *Brilliant Bodies* is that it does not always make as careful a distinction as one would hope between lofty projected ideal and the actual situation on the ground. The main sources that McCall bases his narrative on are anecdotal observations about court life in texts and visual evidence found in paintings. Many Renaissance textual passages, even if purportedly describing real-life events, are coloured by their writers' desire to please a patron or impress an audience. When Basinio di Parma states about Sigismondo Malatesta that "when Apollo rises [...] he spreads his light over all the earth and the smaller stars become hidden by the new splendour, so illustrious was Sigismondo in his armour" (cited on p. 136), it is obviously a rhetorical flourish that may not have corresponded to how any observer, including Basinio, perceived the real Lord of Rimini, but only to how the Lord himself wanted to be seen. Paintings, similarly, are as likely to portray propaganda as to record reality. They tell us as much about fifteenth-century men as illustrations from fashion magazines about women in the twenty-first century or the sculpted physique of film stars about contemporary men. In *Brilliant Bodies*, this discrepancy between evidence and the real world is occasionally acknowledged, and there is a fascinating section called "How Do I Look?" at the end of Chapter 4 that deals more consistently with the struggles of princes to live up to the aesthetic expectations of their era, but in many other places, those without further background knowledge could be forgiven for taking McCall's analysis as one that is about historical truth rather than (partially) manufactured fiction.

Yet, while it might be wise to exercise some caution in using it uncritically as a reference work, *Brilliant Bodies* has unmistakable

quality. It is written with a genuine gusto for the subject that works contagiously on the reader. The book is attractively designed with a pleasing lay-out and a great array of high-quality illustrations. It will appeal to professional art and cultural historians, students, and the general interested public in equal measure. It highlights topics that deserve attention around changes in the image of masculinity and in the visual manifestation of power over time. It offers more than one kernel that could grow into a future project of research. All in all, some minor hesitations aside, it cannot be denied that McCall has done a job as brilliant as the bodies he describes in bringing a somewhat neglected chapter of the history of fashion to the fore.