

Semper Ubi Sub Ubi: Braies and Meaning

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Introduction

Semper Ubi Sub Ubi is an old joke among Latin students that literally translates as “Always Where Under Where”, but is of course, heard as “Always wear underwear.” It is a cute joke and recalls the motherly adage that one should always wear clean underwear in case of an accident. Embedded in these jokes are powerful cultural ideas about protection, modesty and cleanliness – all of which can be afforded to an individual through the wearing of undergarments. Undergarments, despite often being a humble and hidden piece of apparel, show up in Medieval and Renaissance visual arts rather frequently. Picture the Limbourg Brothers’ happy peasants toiling in the fields dressed only in a white shirt with white underpants peeking through a side slit (**Fig. 8**) or Christ and the Two Thieves tortured on crosses wearing only modest groin coverings (**Fig 4**).¹ For most Northern European Medieval and Renaissance scholars, these are familiar images found in manuscript illuminations and paintings. These ‘male’ undergarments, often referred to as *braies*² are not usually read as iconographic objects of any particular significance. While a cursory examination of figures depicted in undergarments shows either field workers dressed for heat and hard work, or martyred figures being physically tortured while modestly draped, a more comprehensive look reveals that *braies* hold more meaning in and of themselves. This paper will focus on a selection of northern European illuminations and panel paintings with select reference to literature created between 1140 and 1450, with works outside of those parameters mentioned for comparative purposes.

Description

What are braies?³ The word comes from French and Latin, but there are other ways of describing this garment worn under clothes, tied at the waist and made from undyed cloth.

¹ The term “peasant” to refer to serfs and freeman, but not enslaved persons. Limbourg brothers, (Herman, Jean, Paul, b. 1370-80 -- d. 1416), *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, “July”, 1412-16, MS65, 294x210mm, Musée Conde, Chantilly.; Kaufmann Crucifixion, c 1340, Bohemia, anon, Gemäldegalerie , Berlin

² From French *braies*, from Old French *braies*, plural of *braie*, from Latin *braca*.

³ For general discussion of undergarments, see Stella Mary Pearce, “The Study of Costume in Painting” *Studies in Conservation*, 4 no.4(Nov 1959): 127-139; Chrystel Brandenburgh, *Clothes make the man: Early medieval textiles from the Netherlands*, PhD dissertation, (Leiden: Leiden University Press,2016). 25-52; Andrea Denny-Brown, *Fashioning Change: the trope of clothing in High- and Late-Medieval England*, (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2010). 11, 13-26.



Fig. 1 *The Trinity Apocalypse*, 1250, R. 16.2, Trinity College, Cambridge England; produced during the thirteenth century craze for illustrated copies of the Book of Revelations or Apocalypse. The male and female figures are portrayed in contemporary dress rather than stylized biblical garments. The most important biblical figures are usually pictured in long robes, often with a draped cloak clasped at the neck, while less important figures are shown in tunics, belted at the waist and sometimes showing a glimpse of *braies* through a side slit. A few working figures are shown only in *braies* that are tied at the waist with a belt and purse.

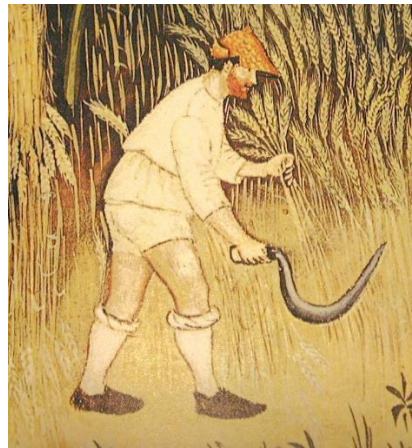


Fig. 2 c. 1267-79, *Martyrologue de St Germain les Pres*, Latin 12834, *Bibliothèque Nationale de France*, Paris; 1405-1408/09, *The Belles Heures of Jean de France, Duc de Berry*, Limbourg Brothers, f. 9r, Metropolitan Museum.

The Carolingians referred to the upper-class version of such a garment as *femoralia* as it touched and covered the thighs, while the lower-class equivalent was called a *subligaculum*, often worn as a loincloth cinched at the waist and passing between the legs more like a cloth diaper.⁴ Francois Boucher writes that Charlemagne is described as wearing a linen *femoralia* beneath his gaiters (*tibiales*).⁵ French thirteenth- and fourteenth-century literature consistently uses the term *braies* when such an undergarment is (rarely) mentioned. Rather than risk confusion with contemporary meanings by trying to translate *braies* into English ('shorts', 'drawers', 'underwear', 'briefs' 'panties' ??), *braies* will be used here to describe the various

⁴ Doreen Yarwood. *Costume in the Western World: pictorial guide and glossary* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980). 5.

⁵ Francois Boucher, *20,000 years of Fashion* (New York: H.H. Abrams, 1987). 157.

iterations of the trouser-like undergarments that can be stepped into and secured at the waist with a belt or cord.⁶

Extant Examples

The only apparent extant example of *braies* comes from Lengeberg Castle, Nikolsdorf, Austria, found not as part of a burial, but rather the infill of building work (**Fig. 3**).⁷ Constructed of an hour-glass piece of linen and held together by narrow stripes that would tie around the hips, this garment still raises more questions than it answers. Typically identified in current literature as “male underwear”, it is yet unclear if this is a specifically gendered garment, especially as no dimensions or technical details of the garment have yet been published. What argues for a ‘male’ garment is their similarity to mid- to late-fifteenth century depictions such as the flagellation of Christ in Chapelle Saint-Antoine at Bessans, Savoie.⁸



Fig 3. *Braies* Lengeberg Castle, Nikolsdorf, Austria.

While extant examples are lovely to examine, they only provide part of the picture. Literary references are also important to understand cultural references. However, as Gale Owen-Crocker noted “authors of Old English heroic poetry were only interested in garments which were war-gear...of the garments worn underneath the mailcoat...we are told nothing.” There are some later mentions of undergarments that will be discussed below.

Sumptuary Law

In terms of social rather than physical function, we know that medieval clothing was used to indicate class difference, to distinguish individuals through heraldry, to identify religious orders, to “single out pilgrims, Jews, Muslims, heretics, lepers, prostitutes, the insane and individuals condemned to death.”⁹ Laws from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, particularly in France, have been preserved and show that arbiters of fashion were mostly concerned with stabilizing class hierarchy through the limiting of clothing consumption and display.¹⁰ “The

⁶ I am indebted to Burns for her struggles with trying to translate *braies*. Burns, “Ladies Don’t Wear Braies”, 152-155.

⁷ Elizabeth Coatsworth and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, *Clothing the Past: Surviving Garments from Early Medieval to Early Modern Western Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2018). 273-278.

⁸ Ibid, 278.

⁹ E. Jane Burns, *Courtly Love Undressed: Reading through Clothes in Medieval French Culture*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 2.

¹⁰ Heller, “Anxiety...” 317.

French laws of 1279 and 1294 are intent on regulating the correlation between status, income, and expenditure on materials for clothing. Unlike typical laws from the fourteenth century onward, they do not attempt to regulate the minutiae of particular styles, cuts, or modes of embellishment.”¹¹ Despite the proliferation of sumptuary law in France, its increased interest in detail and the gradual inclusion of the lesser nobles and knights in the middle income brackets, undergarments are rarely mentioned. While there is mention of the *chainse* or chemise (a long garment worn most often by women under a *cote* and made of thin linen or hemp), *braies* do not make an appearance in sumptuary law. Underwear, then, seemed to have little to do with upward social mobility.

Braies and Masculinity

The connections between *braies* and masculinity are complicated. For instance, the rules for monastic clothing come largely from the Benedictine Rule; monks did not usually wear undergarments. But a communally owned pair of *braies* kept in the monastery’s wardrobe could be “checked out” by a monk embarking on a journey so long as the drawers were washed and put back upon return.¹² Apparently chaffing was not desired and modesty outside the monastery valued.

And should that modesty or even vows of chastity fail in real life, paintings and illuminations could act as moral stand-ins, with *braies*-clad figures as visual representations of perpetually chaste figures designed to be used not only as devotional images for prayer, but also as visual reminders to the laity of the ultimate goals of devotional masculinity. However, the secular and sacred versions of performative masculinity often clashed.¹³ “As part of the discussion of the evils of lechery, pastoral texts often noted that men who committed this sin were keen to advertise it. *Dives and Pauper* laments that the shameful state of affairs is such that men are more embarrassed by chastity than lechery.”¹⁴

Display and Shame

Martyred male figures clad only in *braies* were routinely on public or semi-public display, such as altarpieces that showed crucifixion scenes like the *Kaufmann Crucifixion* (Fig. 4) and the Flemish *Martyrdom of Saint Hippolytus* (Fig 5). The *braies* on a martyred body functioned in several seemingly contradictory ways. *Braies* as a cover for the male genitalia reminded the viewer of Adam’s original sin in disobeying God’s commandments -- eating from the Tree of Knowledge and becoming aware of shame and his own nakedness. *Braies* as a genital cover also reinforced the sanctity of martyrs even as the carnality of the otherwise naked body was exposed to the elements and to torture. The white cloth of *braies* created a visual contrast with the (sometimes torn and battered) flesh and so emphasized the unclothed body as a site of devotion for the viewer and religious physical ecstasy for the martyr.

¹¹ Ibid, 318.

¹² Ibid, 62.

¹³ Virginia Burrus. *The Sex Lives of the Saints: An Erotics of Ancient Hagiography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2004) 45-68.

¹⁴ P.J.P. Goldberg, “Masters and Men in Later Medieval England”, Dawn M. Hadley (ed.), *Masculinity in Medieval Europe*, New York:Longman, 1999, p. 63.



Fig. 4 Kaufmann Crucifixion, c 1340, Bohemia, anon, Gemäldegalerie , Berlin and detail of central panel.



Fig. 5 Unknown artist, Flemish, *Martrydom of Saint Hippolytus*, late 15thc, tempera and oil on panel, Boston MFA

Late medieval and early Renaissance paintings and illuminations, particularly in northern Europe, incorporated contemporaneous details such as clothing, furniture and architecture to create humanist images with which the viewer could feel a greater affinity. The outer garments pictured in these images seem to accurately reflect garment styles and fashion evolutions; it is not a stretch to assume that the *braies* are similarly reflective of contemporary fashion.

Display and Virtue

Sacred figures are not the only ones who strip or are stripped down to their *braies*. Secular men stripping down to their *braies* in preparation for battle has been used as a literary device to present contradictory pictures of masculine warriors. Elizabeth Howard argues that Beowulf's divesting himself of the accoutrements of a warrior and stripping down in preparation for his battle with Grendel was a version of un-manning himself. In order to defeat a monster, a creature that is neither man nor beast, Beowulf had to divest himself of his maleness, his warrior prowess as a man, and become a beast himself. He strips to become less than a warrior and to suffer that humiliation in order to defeat his foe.¹⁵ Conversely, in *chason de geste*, *Le Moniage Guillaume*, Guillaume d'Orange, a retired knight, strips down to his underwear as part of a clever plan to defeat bandits bent on robbing him. His act of allowing the bandits to rob him of his clothes (and seemingly unman him) permits him to enact a previously hatched plan to both defend himself and also thwart an annoying abbot. In this case, the wearing of only *braies* becomes a demonstration of warrior cunning and braggadocio.¹⁶

E. J. Burns, in reviewing different literary uses of *braies* to delineate boundaries of masculinity, describes how Perceval finds himself in bed with a temptress, but takes comfort in the fact that he still has on his *braies*, which apparently act like a chastity belt preserving his virginity/honor. But in *Roman de Tristan*, Tristan's wearing of *braies* convinces King Mark of Cornwall

¹⁵ Elizabeth Howard, "The Clothes Make the Man: Transgressive Disrobing and Disarming in *Beowulf*". *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature*. Ed Cynthia Kuhn and Cindy Carlson. (Youngstown, OH: Cambria Press 2007), 18-19.

¹⁶ Stephanie Hathaway, "Pour ses braies se porra courecier: the Preservation of Guillaume's pants in *Moniage*", *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association*, Vol 5(2009) 59-60.

(erroneously) that no adultery with Iseult has taken place. In this case, the presence of *braies* is no protection against fornication and indeed, as with Guillaume, actually represents male prowess through clever trickery.¹⁷ Whether being shared by monks, pictured on martyrs or being part of a warrior's tale of trickery, *braies* show up as a fluid signifier of "masculinity." *Braies* represented in both literary and visual sources also function as iconographic symbols to perform contradictory versions of maleness.

Display and Voyeurism

Male peasant figures in the Paris *Tacuinum* (**Fig. 6**) are shown wearing different combinations of shoes, hose, *braies*, linen shirts and wool tunics. A number of figures appear in *braies* alone or paired with a short, white linen shirt. In the boar hunting scene pictured below, we can plainly see the short, snug *braies* on the figure in the foreground thrusting an absolutely phallic spear into the side of a boar being torn at by dogs. There is a salacious quality to the portrayal of the man's prominently displayed round rump and muscular legs. The curious lack of outer garments (that are worn by the figure in the background hunting rabbits) seems to draw even more attention to his partial nakedness. There is a similar scene in the painting of truffle hunting: a male figure clad in rolled down hose, *braies* and white shirt in the foreground, slightly bent over, backside facing the viewer. Two figures in the background wear shoes, hose, wool tunics and even a hat. We are again presented with a conspicuously displayed bottom and naked thighs. In both these images, the figures are going about their business, much like we have seen peasants in Books of Hours do. Yet there is a distinct flavor of jocular humor with homoerotic overtones that here are more overtly displayed.



Fig. 6 c. 1390-1400, *Tacuinum Sanitatis* (Bibliothèque nationale de France Nouvelle acquisition latine 1673), hunting (fol 91v), collecting truffles (fol 39v), and a dispute between drunks. Likely commissioned from Giovannino dei Grassi and his workshop, the Paris version is one of the earliest illustrated translations of the Arabic original.

¹⁷ Burns, *Courtly Love*, 159-160.

The third painted page shown above is a more complex scene and one not generally found in Books of Hours: drunks fighting. Four standing figures are shown around a table. In the foreground is a man again clad only in *braies* and shirt; facing him across a round table is a second man quite well turned out in shoes, hose, a long blue wool *cote*, white collar, hood and hat, holding a sheathed sword. These gentlemen are both reaching for vessels that presumably hold liquor on a table covered in containers. The two fully clad figures in the background are engaged in fist-a-cuffs, one of whom has a drawn knife at the ready. The foreground figures seem unconcerned or unaware of the scuffle as they busily imbibe. The dangers of too much alcohol are clear here: fights and possibly losing one's clothes. It is not at all coincidental that the writing on the page outlines medical uses of wine and what might be a hangover cure.

Peasants of the Paris *Taciunum* are positioned and dressed to be objects of humorous derision and voyeuristic gaze by the noble classes. It is not a stretch to consider voyeurism as a part of other Books of hours like the *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry* which was commissioned by and/or created for John, Duke of Berry for private viewing (**Fig. 7**). The twelve-month Calendar vignettes are the most striking of the Book's illuminations. Five of the months show aristocratic pursuits while seven show peasants working in fields with backdrops of Ducal architectural holdings. Calm, orderly scenes convey a sense of ideal social order where aristocrats are elegant and always entertained, and peasants work diligently, content with the simplicity of their rustic lives. It is all, of course, an illusion created for the pleasure of the Duke. John could be assured that he would find the images pleasing and specifically to his liking and his admitted sense of 'plaisance' in choosing objects for his collection, which sometimes included young men. The Duke's sexual fluidity "show[s] that he did indeed have an interest in looking at the genitals of the lower classes."¹⁸

¹⁸ Michael Camille, " 'For Our Devotion and Pleasure': The Sexual Objects of Jean, Duc de Berry", *Art History*, 24:2 (Apr 2001), 174.



Fig. 7 Limbourg brothers, (Herman, Jean, Paul, b. 1370-80 -- d. 1416), *Très Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, “July”, 1412-16, MS65, 294x210mm, Musée Conde, Chantilly.

Conclusion

Braies are a humble garment. They are not difficult to construct. Medieval re-enactors find them comfortable to wear. Artists of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance periods included contemporary versions of them in scenes of shame and torture, harvesting and drinking, swimming, sleeping and dying. Figures from the humblest of beggars and laboring peasants to revered martyrs are pictured wearing the white linen undergarment.

By working from the extant to the depicted, we can ask why such a humble garment -- so often hidden by other more opulent clothes, rarely mentioned in literature and discounted by some costume historians as lacking significance -- shows up so often in late Medieval and early Northern Renaissance works of art. When *braies* are depicted in certain artworks, they not only contribute to and support primary meaning created by other pictured objects, but sometimes create meaning in and of themselves. *Braies* on martyrs speak to multiple meanings of shame, humiliation, and vulnerability, but also the divine ecstasy experienced by the martyr. On a peasant pictured toiling in a field or bending over to pick truffles, *braies* can suggest modesty, poverty, practicality or be suggestive of the erotic pleasures that lie beneath. Clothing layers meaning, and *braies* all the more so.