Medieval Costume and Fashion

Herbert Norris

MEDIEVAL COSTUME AND FASHION

HERBERT NORRIS

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(continued on back flap)

I DEDICATE THIS VOLUME

TO

ALL LOVERS OF

ARCHÆOLOGY AND RESEARCH

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Herbert Norris was renowned in his time as a costume architect and archaeologist. He designed historical and theatrical costume and stage sets for one hundred plays in England and America, as well as for a number of British films and pageants. Nevertheless, his series of books, *Costume and Fashion,* is considered his finest achievement.

Originally intended to be a six-volume series that would tell the story of costume and fashion from the time of ancient Greece until the end of the nineteenth century, only four volumes were completed and published before his death in 1950. They include *Volume 1: The Evolution of European Dress through the Earlier Ages* (1924); *Volume 2: Senlac to Bosworth, 1066-1485* (1927); *Volume 3: The Tudors, 1485-1603*, 2 vols. (1938); and *Volume 6: The Nineteenth Century* (1933). The fourth and fifth volumes, if completed, would have covered the Stuart and Hanoverian periods of fashion history, respectively. This book is the unabridged reprint of Volume 2 of the series: *Senlac to Bosworth, 1066–1485*, originally published in 1927. The reader may notice a few references to the other volumes in the text of this work.

Volume 1 of the series is currently out of print. Volume 3 is available in a one-volume (unabridged) Dover edition published in 1997. It combines Books I and II, and is entitled *Tudor Costume and Fashion* (ISBN 0-486-29845-0). Volume 6 of the series (*The Nineteenth Century*) is also available in a Dover reprint published in 1998. It is entitled *Nineteenth Century Costume and Fashion* (ISBN 0-486-40292-4).

FOREWORD

THE gratifying reception accorded to Volume I. of this History, particularly in America, has encouraged the publishers and others to suggest its continuation, here presented. Volume II. follows the same general plan as that used in the first volume, with certain modifications and considerable additions.

In order to identify the period discussed with events and personalities familiar to the reader, the practice employed in Volume I., of prefacing each chapter with a list of contemporary historical events, is continued in this book.

The accuracy of information given in the chapter on Heraldry, and the sections dealing with Chivalry, the Order of the Garter, the Order of the Bath, and Peers' Parliamentary Robes, is guaranteed by the fact that I am indebted for supervision of their details to Mr. G. Ambrose Lee, C.B., C.V.O., Clarenceux King-of-Arms, whose expert knowledge and kind assistance have been of the utmost value.

Again, my most grateful thanks are due to my wife and daughter, whose help with French and German translations has been most useful; to Major D. S. Paterson for his most able work in editing the MS., and to Mrs. Paterson for her talented aid in preparing drawings. To Messrs. J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd. I am more than indebted for the courtesy they have shown to a harassed author and the care they have devoted to the publication of his work.

HERBERT NORRIS.

LONDON, 1927.

INTRODUCTION

CHANGES in fashion arise from strange and diverse causes: sometimes a vanquished foe revenges himself by revolutionising the dress of his conquerors, or of their wives—sometimes a whim or deformity of empress or courtesan imprints its seal on the mode of the century—again, the arrival of some new royal consort or great notability from afar brings its train of consequences, either to enrich or simplify the nation's dress—some "precious" cult revives an art or manner of yesteryear, and behold, its votaries array themselves in the garments of its earlier vogue, although with a temerity usually tempered by the addition of comfort-giving modern accessories.

In studying the costume of the periods comprised in this volume, it is not sufficient to know the cut, shape and decoration of each garment; one must also know the manner of wearing, and the general effect aimed at by the wearer. Complaint is often heard that a given period is not suited to the player cast for a certain part. This may be occasionally true, but much can be done by a judicious combination of art, knowledge and consistency. Not every figure is well adapted to carry off with ease and dignity a prevailing fashion, but almost all will endeavour to approximate shape and carriage to the mode of the moment. This can be done as effectively in wearing historical costume as in conformity to the ever-changing fashions of to-day. It requires the same devotion to detail, courageously adopted and consistently followed, with rigid avoidance of the temptation to incorporate "becoming" features or accessories from another age. For example, results fatal to an artistic triumph would follow the wearing of the fifteenth-century "butterfly" headdress, which should project almost horizontally from the back of the head, tilted over the eyes in the manner of the latest hat of 1927. Nor is artifice necessarily confined to costume.

It is a curious fact that a certain type of face seems to be associated with each definitely marked period of history. True, the far-reaching effects of contemporary fashions cannot alter the shape of the bony structure of the face; but, nevertheless, it is certain that clearly differentiated types, considered beautiful at a given time, influenced the

physiognomy and the apparent shape of the features, so that the heads of a given period acquired a general character to which individuals succeeded in adapting their own appearance.

It may be well to record here certain items of general interest which it has been found difficult to weave into the later structure of the book.

In selecting costumes for a given set of characters, their social position is not the only consideration to be borne in mind. Another factor bearing on the appropriate attire is the part of the country in which they lived. For example, a noble lady living on the borders of Scotland or Wales would be considerably behind the metropolitan mode of the day; and of course the same thing applies to men.

Dress of children. Babies of all classes were swathed in swaddling bands, and, for the christening and baptismal ceremony, the chrysom cloth was used—a piece of linen put upon the head, the ends being bound round the body. On these and other special occasions, "The child (of royal and noble parents) must be wrapped in a velvet cloak of any desired colour, which must be at least three ells long . . . and must be furred with miniver; and when the child is wrapped in the velvet, then must be put over the child (when the person carrying it has it on her arm) a long couvrechef or kerchief of violet silk, extending from the child's head down to the ground, and at the feet end as long as the cloak or longer" (La Viscomtesse de Furnes, fifteenth century).

The dress of boys throughout the period treated in this volume may be taken as exactly similar to that of their elders.

Girls wore a simplified version of their mothers' dress, but invariably had their hair flowing, often confined by a fillet or snod, or perhaps a wreath of flowers.

Women's arms and legs. An important fact to remember is that during the Middle Ages women's arms were never bare. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when low necks and extremely bare shoulders were the vogue, it was a rigid rule with Dame Fashion that the arms were entirely covered. It is curious that in the fifteenth century the cuffs of sleeves concealed even the hands to the second knuckle, and that at the same time the décolletage hardly rose above the waistbelt.

It would be interesting to know what the ladies of mediæval times had on their legs, but unfortunately scarcely any representations of leg-coverings are shown in illuminated MSS. The little that is seen indicates that their legs were clothed in the same manner as those of the men—

in braies, hosen, garters, crossgartering and footgear, the shoes being of the same type as those worn by the men.

Women's riding-dress. Up to the beginning of the thirteenth century there was no special dress prescribed for women to wear when mounted on horseback. Before this time they simply wore the most ample gown they possessed, with perhaps the paenula added. It was not until the thirteenth century that they adopted, as a riding-habit, the most useful of men's garments, the gardcorp, which they wore over the ordinary gown, as seen in Fig. 215.

Night attire. The question of night attire in the Middle Ages is a delicate one.

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries the sherte and camise fulfilled the dual purpose of day and night intimacies among the best people. "Even with the publicity inseparable from the absence of special bedrooms, mediæval modesty did not provide a nightgown" (*Social England*). Documents of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries indicate that, with exceptions, both men and women went to bed as nature made them. Frequent mention is made of great personages being roused suddenly in the night and forced to rise. To hide their nakedness they anxiously seized whatever happened to be the nearest possible vesture—a peliçon, houpeland—but often only the bed-clothes. A "robe de chambre" or dressing-gown was used only in exceptional cases.

In illuminated MSS. of the fourteenth century one finds representations of kings and queens in bed, with no visible garment, but wearing their crowns,[1] and in one instance a queen wears only a crown and crespinette. In another MS. the Three Magi are shown together in bed, their three crowned heads resting on three pillows, but apparently naked; and in yet another the coif is the only covering worn by a man in bed with a woman.

A picture of Charles V. of France in bed shows him wearing a low-necked white nightgown, tied in front and having long close sleeves. He wears his crown, and his head rests upon a cloth-of-gold pillow partly covered with a white head-sheet. Mention of nightgowns and nightcaps —coifs—is found in writings of the fifteenth century; and a picture of this time shows a man wearing a nightgown with long close sleeves of cloth of gold! Sir Richard Whittington, however, is represented on his deathbed, naked, with his head swathed in a turban. In pictures of this century and earlier, the inmates of mediæval hospitals are shown in

[1] Probably the fancy of an inventive artist, for purposes of identification.

bed quite naked; and it appears to have been a habit, reprobated by careful housewives, for servants and others to flick out the candle with the tail of their shertes or camises after getting into bed.

Meals. In Anglo-Saxon times and until the middle of the twelfth century it was usual for kings and nobles to have their tables laid four times a day, with "royal sumptuousness," for the whole court or household. After this date we find it recorded that "it is the custom, whether from parsimony, or as they themselves say, from fastidiousness, for princes to provide only one meal a day for their court."

About this time an improvement occurred in the standard of behaviour, at table, and as regards ordinary social intercourse. William of Malmesbury, writing about David of Scotland (1123–1153), tells us that he "rubbed off all the rust of barbarism. He released from the payment of taxes for three years all such of his countrymen as would pay more attention to their dwellings, dress more elegantly and feed more nicely." Another historian of the time writes that "all men, clerics and laymen alike, shall be content with two courses."

In the thirteenth century the fashionable hour for dinner was 11 a.m. and for supper 6 o'clock. Before retiring to bed, cakes and comfits (creations of the confectioner's art: round, square, or oblong sweetmeats made of sugar and what not) were handed round in gold or silver dishes, covered with a cloth. These were usually kept upon the "dressoir," at hand in case a visitor should call. Spiced wines, especially concoctions called "hippocras" [1] and "clarry" [2] were the chief beverages drunk by the upper classes "in company."

From early times, and during the whole of the Middle Ages, and indeed onwards into Tudor days, it was customary in the great houses for minstrels and gleomen to precede the entry of important dishes at any great feast.

The middle classes took their chief meal about eight in the evening. One kind of potage and two varieties of meat only at one meal were allowed. Each diner had his own knife and spoon, which were placed beside him in a case made to contain them.

The lower classes carried their knife and spoon in the wallet which served for many purposes; and among the peasantry the spoon, often of wood or horn, was tucked into the hood or cap.

[1] *Hippocras :* a white or red wine in which different aromatic ingredients were infused. It took its name from the particular kind of bag, termed "Hippocrates sleeve," through which it was strained.

[2] *Clarry :* a mixed wine, two-thirds white and one-third red, mingled with honey.

More details of the table are to be found in records of the fourteenth century. Among fashionable people the usual hours for dinner and supper remained the same as in the previous century, and continued so during the following.

For a great feast or banquet given by a prince or great noble the arrangement of the tables was as follows: The "chairs of estate" for the prince's family and his guests were set at the end of the great hall upon the dais under the canopy and "cloth of estate"; the tables for the nobility were lower and arranged on either side. The lesser nobility occupied seats and tables along the two sides of the hall, the buffets and dressoirs being placed at the farther end opposite the chairs of estate.

The *tables* used for important people on these occasions were long and narrow, about two feet in width, having ornamental supports at the ends, and strengthened by a tie-rod which also served as a foot-rest (*see* Fig. 677). Other kinds of tables in use at earlier periods and during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were formed of boards laid on two trestles connected by a tie-rod. The end of a trestle is shown in Fig. 421.

The *table-cloths* were of fine white linen or double damask, with borders of velvet, gold, and silk fringes. Two cloths were used; the under one fell to the ground at either end, and to a depth of about ten to twelve inches at the sides. Over this a cloth the same size as the top of the table was laid. The dressoirs and buffets were also covered with rich cloths.

In *setting the table* the elaborate salt-cellar, Fig. 679, was placed on the host's right hand, and rolls of bread arranged in groups, platters, trenchers, forks (*see* p. 141), spoons and cups were set by the pages and servitors for each guest. Each guest supplied his own knife, but large carving-knives were placed in certain positions upon the tables.

The "cornet l'eau" was sounded to announce the time of the repast, and all guests were served with water for the *washing of hands*. In the case of princes the ceremony was performed in a special way with the "double basin." The major-domo proceeded to the buffet and fetched two basins placed one on top of the other, the under one, with spout, containing aromatic water. These were presented to the cupbearer, who, kneeling on one knee at the side of the honoured guest, took the under basin of water in the right hand and poured the water over the hands of the guest, the water falling into the empty basin held in the cupbearer's left hand. A towel or napkin was presented by an esquire.

The hands of less important personages were washed by an esquire who poured water over them from the ewer (*see* Fig. 680) carried in the right hand, the water falling into a basin held in the left hand.

The *service* was performed by esquires, pages and servitors. All the viands and wines were kept on the buffets, and the esquires brought each dish and presented it across the table to the diner for his or her inspection, and when selected the esquire carved—"an art which every gentleman should not neglect"—the platters being placed before the guests by pages.

It was considered the height of good form for a gentleman to feed off the same platter or trencher as the lady whom he escorted into dinner.

Wines, having been tasted, were handed by kneeling cupbearers, who held the cup (Figs. 182, 184, 423, and 438, No. 9) in the left hand and removed its cover with the right.

For each course five or six dishes were served, often more, accompanied by many rich sauces. Between each course and the next, at an important banquet, a "sotelte"[1] was brought in—a confection of jelly, pasties, pies and sugar made in all kinds of fantastic devices, ships, castles, etc., some bearing mottoes. A contemporary description of one such sotelte runs as follows: "The Holy Virgyne and Gabrielle gretynge hur with an Ave." A "comedy" was another name for a quaint dish. The chef d'œuvre of the banquet would be a roast peacock, brought to table on the best dish, with head and fully displayed tail.[2] Frequently at an important banquet musicians, actors and acrobats gave performances during or between the courses; these took place in the centre of the hall.

After the repast the ceremony of washing hands was repeated, and the table-cloths were removed. Spices, comfits, wines, especially hippocras, were handed round, and the signal for the games, etc. to begin was given by the host.

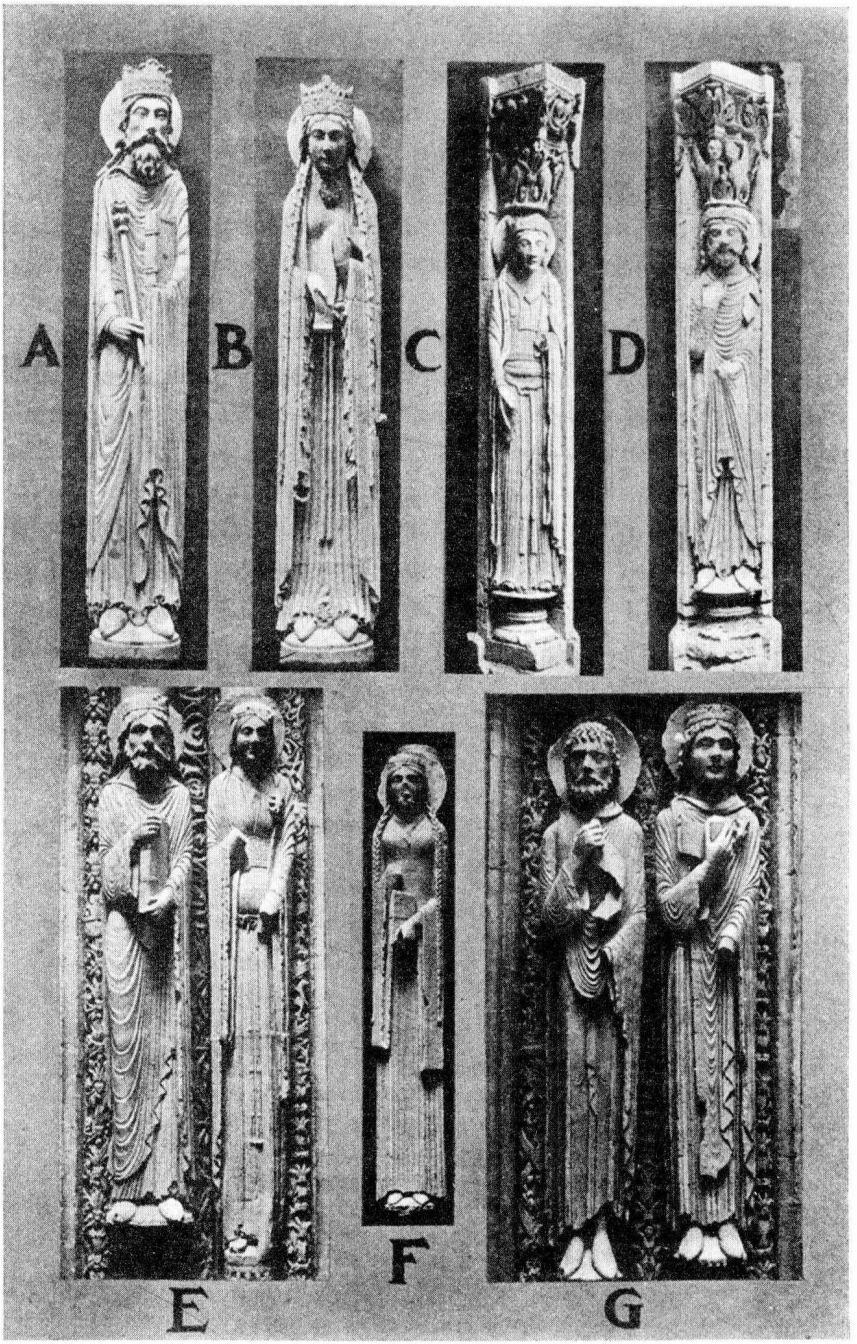
At the end of the fourteenth century it became usual for the lord and his family to dine in "an upper chamber," and the old custom of the whole household partaking of supper together in the great hall began to die out, except on any auspicious occasion.

Breakfast made its first appearance in the fifteenth century. It consisted of bread, beef, brawn and herrings, with wine or ale as the accompanying beverage.

The usual titivating took place among ladies and gentlemen about

[1] *Sotelte* = a subtlety.

[2] For a fourteenth-century menu, *see* p. 285.



Photos by W. F. Mansell

PLATE II. SCULPTURE IN FRANCE. TWELFTH CENTURY

A. Le Roi Clovis
B. La Reine Clotilde
} From Notre Dame Corbeil

C. La Reine de Saba
D. Le Roi Salomon
} In Saint Louis de Naud

E. A Saint
F. Do.
G. Do.
} In Cathedrale de Chartres

to enter the hall for either dinner or supper, but the only mention of "dinner dress" to be met with in mediæval writings is a garment called a "seurcot à mangier." Ladies of fashion retired after a strenuous day and discarded their daytime gowns, robing themselves in the surcote à manger before sitting down to dine. The particular shape of this garment is not described; but as the sideless gown came into fashion during the second half of the fourteenth century, and some illuminations show it worn at dinner, it is safe to surmise that this was the same garment.

Table manners in mediæval times are usually thought of as having been anything but nice. Most of the common decencies of to-day, however, were practised in the fifteenth century, and probably much earlier. Regulations for good behaviour, to be found in contemporary writings, present a fresh aspect for our contemplation, as evidenced by the undernoted extracts:

Byt not thy brede, but breke as myche as thou wyll ete.

Do not cram thy cheeks out wyth food like an ape.

Drye thy mouthe when thou schall drynke.

Yf thou spitt over the borde or elles upon it thou schalle be holden an uncurtayse mon.

Clense not thy tethe at mete with knyfe, styk or wande, or drynke with food in thy mouthe.

Nor blow not on thy drynke nor mete or put thy knyfe in the mouthe nor with the borde-clothe thi tethe thou wype.

After mete when thou shal wasshe spitt not in the basyn.

Whenne that so ys that ende shalle kome of mete your knyffes clene (and put them where they ouhte to be (in the case), and foule tales noone to other telle.

Withe fulle mouthe drynke in no wyse.

Whenne ye shalle drynke, your mouthe clence withe a clothe.

Thy mouthe not to full when thou dost eate.

Not smackynge thy lyppes as comonly do hogges,
Nor gnawynge the bones as it were dogges.
Such rudenes abhorre, suche beastlynes flie.
At the table behave thy selfe manerly.

Pyke not thy teethe at the table syttynge
Nor use at thy meate over muche spytynge.
Ley not thyne elbowe nor thy fyst
Upon the tabylle whylis that thou etist.
Bulk (belch or hiccup) not as a beene were yn thy throte.

Thy spone with pottage to full do not fyll
For fylynge the cloth, if thou fortune to spyll.
For rudnes it is thy pottage to sup
Or speak to any, his head in the cup.

Nor suppe not with grete sowndynge
Nother potage nor other thynge.

Cleanliness and the bath. In justice to our ancestors of the Middle Ages it should be made clear that the opinion of their uncleanliness entertained in these later times is without foundation. Advice as to thorough washing is frequently given in mediæval writings.

"And loue (love) you to be cleane and wel apparelled, for from our cradles let us abhor uncleannes, which neither nature or reason can endure."

With the coming of the Romans the bath was introduced into Roman Britain. Romans of all classes paid great attention to cleanliness and the performance of the toilet. These customs were adopted by the Roman Briton, and in Roman settlements of any importance buildings were erected in which hot and cold baths were the principal attraction; and here the people spent the leisure which we pass to-day in cafés and clubs.

During the Anglo-Saxon period there is meagre evidence of the continuance of this wholesome practice in England, but by the eleventh and twelfth centuries plenty of references to the use of the bath in France are to be found. These suggest that if the English were not too clean, such was not the case with the Normans and French. It may be safely surmised that the bath was an important detail in the toilet of the luxurious Eleanor of Aquitaine, even during her "Grand Tour" of Europe to the Holy Land.

In troubadour songs and stories mention is frequently made of the bath, taken at home or in an establishment erected for the purpose. By this time, the thirteenth century, public baths had lost their importance as a facility for reunion, and had an exclusively hygienic use. It may be surprising to some that in the unsophisticated (!) days of the thirteenth century "bath salts" were used — aromatic baths were a favourite indulgence with the upper and middle classes.

General abhorrence of "the unwashed" and of dirty clothes is proved by many references, most emphatic in their disapproval, to be found in romances of the time. It is true, however, that we have some evidence to the contrary: a certain washing bill from December to May only amounts to fifteen pence, and, even taking into consideration the value of money at that time, this does not speak highly for the fastidiousness of a royal lady of the early thirteenth century.

During the periods when it was the fashion to wear many garments, with numerous etceteras and an elaborate coiffure, it must have taken hours to dress; when garments were difficult to change it followed that this happened infrequently. Simplicity of dress promotes cleanliness of body. A fact which indicates that at least the upper classes were

accustomed to the luxury of conveniences for ablutions is that nearly all monastic establishments had bathrooms or baths installed for the use of the inmates, and special ones were reserved for visitors. The clergy did *not* condemn cleanliness of person, but they were very much opposed to meticulous care of the body and hair, and the long ceremony of the toilet which took up so much time among fashionable society. Incessant complaints by the clergy on this point are met with in the writings of various periods.

The baths. The baths of Roman times were sunk in the floor, but this was not always the case in the Middle Ages. There are some representations of baths in illuminated MSS. of various dates. One twelfth-century drawing shows the use of a large metal bowl or basin set upon a wooden stand, very highly ornamented and therefore clearly regarded as an important item of domestic equipment. Another drawing (*see* Fig. 597) illustrates an ordinary wooden wash-tub such as had been in use for some centuries.

In the thirteenth century and onwards, it was customary to have the bath enclosed in a tent-like arrangement of linen, hung from a hoop fixed to the ceiling, and in this the bather could perform ablutions without fear of spectators, or of splashing the contents of the apartment. It is probable that a shower-bath or douche was arranged in this tent. In a wardrobe account of Queen Isabella of Valois, 419 yards of linen to hang round the bath is mentioned.

It is evident that baths were considered a great comfort, and an illuminated MS. dating about 1475 illustrates the various luxuries indulged in at that time. In one miniature, circular wooden tubs are shown, hung by chains from the ceiling, with two or three persons bathing in each.

In the fifteenth century three beautiful bathrooms were fitted up at Windsor and Westminster for the use of the royal family.

Fifteenth-century directions for giving a bath or "stewe" to a gentleman run as follows:

> If your lord will to the bath his body to wasche clene
> Hang sheets round about the roof; do thus as I mean.
> Every sheet full of flowers and herbs sweet and green,
> And look ye have sponges five or six thereon to sit or lean.
> Look there be a great sponge thereon your lord to sit
> Thereon a sheet as so he may bathe him there afit.
> Under his feet also a sponge if there be any to put,
> And always be sure of the door and see that he be shut.
> A bason full in your hand of herbs hot and fresh
> And with a soft sponge in hand his body that ye wasche,
> Rince him with rose water warm and fair upon him sprinkle