

Dressed Up and Ready to Read

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Ruthann Robson, [*Dressing Constitutionally: Hierarchy, Sexuality, and Democracy from Our Hairstyles to Our Shoes*](#) (2013).

One of the most heated series of conversations I had with my colleagues in law school was about hair: color, style, length, and accoutrements. All of these choices apparently *meant* something. It was unclear to me what, precisely, my haircut at the time signalled—or didn't—but it was clear to me that Hair Matters.

Thankfully, [Ruthann Robson](#) has authored *Dressing Constitutionally: Hierarchy, Sexuality, and Democracy from our Hairstyles to Our Shoes*. The book is something of a relief for me. It clarifies how my hair (and clothes, and shoe) choices are constrained by the regulatory framework of the American Constitution. I feel less responsible for my Hair and Clothing Mistakes, since it is clear that my choices are subject to constitutional limits. And it has advanced my understanding of what Dressing Means.

The book is fantastic. I spent most of my time marvelling at the work that it must have taken to produce. Each chapter is thickly layered with individual stories, historical moments, and case reviews. The connections between and amongst the identified parts are beautifully drawn. The writing is lucid and mature. The book is Robson at her best.

The premise of the book is straightforward: constitutional considerations constrain, inform, and explain our clothing—or lack of clothing—choices. Robson drives the book through seven chapters that explore the premise in different contexts. In each chapter, she draws out the themes of hierarchy, sexuality, and democracy—themes that she argues “animate the constitutional concerns surrounding attire and appearance.” (P. 2). These themes are enhanced by attention to the ways in which clothing has influenced the design of the constitutional text, to the complexity of challenging dress through constitutional litigation, to the pervasiveness of deference to perceived common sense in judicial and legislative decision-making on dress, to concerns about whether dressing is trivial or fetishized, to the historical context in which all of these conversations are held.

Every reader will find a favorite chapter. Here I'll only identify a highlight or two from the rich text in each. Dressing Historically (Ch. 1) will draw in those with a passion for historical constitution reflections from the Magna Carta to the Stamp Act. Dressing Barely (Ch. 2) is essential reading for those with a penchant for indecent exposure. Dressing Sexily (Ch. 3) transgresses from cross-dressing to sexual violence. Dressing Professionally (Ch. 4) zips up on dressing in the private work place and general uniformity. For those who look forward to burning and reading books, Dressing Disruptively (Ch. 5), which ranges over school discipline and other political statements, must be read first. Dressing Religiously (Ch. 6) covers body modification, prisons, and niqabs with sensitivity and rigor.

Let me spend a final moment on two of my favorite parts of the book. First, I loved Robson's attention to “slovenly interpretations,” her label for the tendency of decision-makers to rely on their seemingly common sense understanding of the meaning of clothes in interpreting and applying constitutional principles and doctrines.

Second, in *Dressing Economically* (Ch. 7), Robson does again what I most love about her work: She teases out the class backdrop. Hierarchy is a repeated theme throughout the book, so the power and class context in which constitutionalism laces through dressing is always present. *Dressing Economically*, though, takes us through slavery and cotton; laissez-faire economics, laundries, and child labor; and leaves us examining free trade and fair trade.

The book is supported by a [blog](#). I'm relieved because when I finished reading the book, I wanted more. Not because the book was wanting, but because the book was so stimulating; because the stories of the real people in the legal disputes under consideration were so fascinating. The blog allows the themes of the book to evolve over time, which is a marvellous idea. I wish more authors would embrace the potential that supplementary resources provided online provides.

At the end of the day, I am left with a thicker sense of the fabric of American (and in some limited ways, Canadian) constitutionalism and a richer sense of how dressing is intimately connected with the equality project. What a genius idea to provide all of this through the lens of dressing.

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