

OF ATTIRE AND ARTS: SHAKESPEARE'S FASHION IN EVOLUTION

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Abstract:

*"Then- as the manner of our country is-
In thy best robes uncover'd on the bier,
Thou shalt be borne to the same ancient vault."*

(Romeo and Juliet, IV,I 109-111)

The spirit of the Renaissance was not only instrumental in heralding the advent of a new epoch in the history of Europe in the field of inventions, artistic manifestations or new discoveries, but it brought from Florence and Italy a new form of fashion that affected every form of design, completely altering the fashion of costume and obliterating the Gothic, Biblical or Byzantine features prevalent in contemporary stage and society. It was a time when sumptuous fabrics, new dyes and exuberant dresses would come to prevail. In "Costume in Shakespeare's England: An Account of the Life of His Age" (Clarendon Press, 1917, pp.91-118) Macquoid traces how Shakespeare himself, no stranger to fashion, adopted this elaborate and dramatic mode of styling and costume in his plays which became the most important visual element in his stage-works. Although notoriously indifferent to historical accuracy, the different types of apparels in which Shakespeare decked his characters may be classified into- "Ancient" or out of style clothing to represent another period; "Antique" clothing to distinguish classical or mythological characters, his "Dreamlike" or fanciful clothing for plays like "A Midsummer Night's Dream" (where costume also serves as a medium of deception) or "Traditional" clothing for the general players. Also called the "Peacock Age", this was a period when science and mathematics influenced greatly on the clothing as they were based on geometrical shapes, rather than showing the natural body shape and used shoulder and hip pads to provide the "stiff" square look for men and gave the "hour-glass" shape for the female decked in a belled skirt, the bosom tightly lifted at the plunging neckline. Shakespearean stage fashion emphasized on gallantry and beauty and involved in his theatrics, an astounding array of costumes like basquine, enseigne, canions, the crescent hat, gorget, farthingale, zipone and zornea, ruff, stomacher, or codpieces along with wigs and shaving off the eyebrows and foreheads to provide his characters with an air of intellect using a receded hairline. Repeated reference to fashion impregnates all of Shakespeare's plays with Portia, describing her English admirer, saying "*I think he bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany*" (Merchant of Venice, I. ii) "*O ill-starr'd wench! Pale as thy smock*" (Othello, V. ii) Shakespeare's plays continued to be performed in contemporary costumes until about a hundred and twenty years ago when Charles Kemble and Macready startled theatrical London with their historically accurate and

elaborate production. In 1923, the first of a series of innovative modern dress of Shakespeare plays, *Cymbeline*, directed by H.K. Aylliff opened at Barry Jackson's Birmingham Theatre in England. Academy Award nominee costume designer Sandy Powell and Lisa Westcott invokes the Renaissance spirit of Shakespeare's times to life on celluloid "Shakespeare in Love" (1998) where the audience spots Joseph Fiennes as Shakespeare in a green leather jacket, signifying the modernisation and evolution of fashion in this sphere. British actress Emily Blunt garnered a Golden Globe award for her performance on "The Young Victoria" (2009) and the singularity in adapting the fashion of the age. Charles L. Hayter complains about "*updating*" Shakespeare and Sir Alec Guinness in his essay "Shakespeare in Modern Dress" comments "*I believe that modern dress will often pay rich dividends in presentation. Modern dress will often breathe fresh air on an old play and give it a fair chance of revaluation, firmly pointing out how little the human heart changes through the centuries, and how remarkably alike we are to our forebears.*" The impact of fashion on Shakespeare's stagecraft and its gradual evolution from classical antiquity to the modern era provides an interesting dimension to the students of literature.

Keywords: Shakespearean stage-craft, Fashion, Renaissance, Elizabeth 1, Peacock Age, adaptation.

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During the late Middle Ages in Europe, dramatic enactments of Biblical stories were prevalent, therefore actual Christian vestments, stylized from traditional Byzantine court dress, were worn as costumes to keep the performances as realistic as possible. Stereotypical characterization was key when clothing performers for this style of theatre. In most instances actors had to supply their own costumes when playing a character found in daily life. Medieval clothes history traditionally begins with the fall of the Western Roman Empire in AD 476. The transition from classical to the medieval clothing was more gradual. The Byzantine Empire continued for another thousand years, with both sexes of the upper classes wearing the tunic as the basic garment. In the West, the invasions from the north brought trousers, fitted tunics, and hoods, but it was nearly three centuries before any recorded Western style evolved from the interaction of Roman and northern European forms of dress.

After the Carolingians established political supremacy in a large part of Europe and Charlemagne became Holy Roman emperor in AD 800, he essentially wore the dress of a Byzantine emperor. Unlike Byzantine emperors, Charlemagne only wore robes on state occasions. His everyday attire consisted of an under tunic, an over tunic with a coloured silk border, and breeches or trousers cross-gartered to the knee. He also wore a semicircular cloak fastened at the shoulder and a round cloth cap. Illuminated manuscripts show other European monarchs wearing similar styles.

Fashion did not change much over the next three centuries. The catalyst for the change in costume that marks the division between the early medieval period and the Romanesque period was the first of the Crusades, which began in 1095. Some influences from the East, mainly a diversity and richness of material, reached Europe with the Moorish invasion of Spain and south-western France and through the Norman conquest of Sicily, but changes in fashion were infrequent during the larger part of the Medieval clothing period. The great and startling effect on fashion occurred in the 12th century, after the start of the Crusades.

The spirit of the Renaissance was not only instrumental in heralding the advent of a new era in the history of Europe in the field of inventions, artistic manifestations or new discoveries, but it brought from Florence and Italy a new form of fashion that affected every form of design, completely altering the fashion of costume and obliterating the gothic, Biblical or Byzantine features prevalent in contemporary society. It was a time when sumptuous fabrics, new dyes and exuberant dresses prevailed. Renaissance fashions were characterized with a new scale of opulence and extravagance never quite reached in the Middle Ages. It is often said that the Renaissance arrived relatively late in England, compared to Italy and other states in continental Europe. The Elizabethan Age – the period during which Elizabeth I (1558–1603) was England's ruling monarch – is often thought of as a golden age in the country's history. It was the highpoint, for example, of the English Renaissance, and poetry and literature truly thrived. It was the time of Elizabethan theatre, when William Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote new, dynamic, groundbreaking plays. Moreover, the Elizabethan era was one of unprecedented expansion and exploration abroad, while within England itself, the Protestant Reformation was influencing the thought and approach of the population as a whole. The invention of new sea routes and the printing press popularised the various facets of fashion. Since clothing was so expensive due to the elaborate decorations required to be fashionable, many people, especially those of the middle class, had to resell clothing already worn to second-hand shops to regain enough money to buy new clothes. As the middle class began to copy the trends set by the royalty, we see in this period, the rise of the tailor class and growth of tailor guilds. Clothing was a primary indicator of wealth in those days so the more dramatic and opulent the costume, the better. The Isham family dresses found at Lamport Hall, Northamptonshire, and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, supply the needful information about Elizabethan clothing. This interesting collection of Elizabethan and Jacobean clothes reaches in date from about 1555, nine years before the birth of Shakespeare. Shakespeare himself, no stranger to fashion, adopted this elaborate and dramatic mode of styling and costume in his plays which became the most important visual element in his stage-works.

"Costume," in Shakespeare's England: An Account of the Life and Manners of His Age, Macquoid provides a detailed account of men's and women's clothing in Elizabethan and Jacobean times. The critic also discusses the influential figures, particularly Queen Elizabeth, who influenced the era's trends in fashion. Queen Elizabeth 1 had natural red hair but to maintain the look of a "virgin queen", she constantly dyed her hair yellow and wore lots of wigs known as periwigs. It is believed that she owned over 80 periwigs and hairpieces. Snoods (a kind of headdress) also gained popularity during the Elizabethan era. Queen Elizabeth herself provided an extravagant fashion model--an inventory of her clothing in 1600 included almost 300 gowns and several hundred other costumes, in addition to state apparel. Towards the end of her reign, English dress became increasingly exaggerated, following the eccentric tastes of the aging queen.

The sense of order which governed Elizabethan society also governed the type of dress one could wear. "Sumptuary" laws outlined the degree of luxury allowed each social class, although a 1580 statute modified the law to allow some luxury to those who could afford it.

The following extract from a letter written in 1578 by Gilbert Talbot to his father, the Earl of Shrewsbury, shows that ladies walked about in their night attire rather freely: "On May Day I saw Her Majesty and it pleased her to speak to me very graciously. In the morning about 8 o'clock I happened to walk under the gallery where Her Majesty by chance was, and looking out of the window my eye was full towards her. She shewed to be greatly ashamed there of, for that she was unready, and in her night stuff."

During the Elizabethan time science and mathematics influenced greatly on the clothing as they were based on geometrical shapes rather than showing the natural body shape using shoulder pads, hip pads made with whale bone or to give the "stiff", proper look. The fashions were designed to give a small waisted look, not just for women but also for men. This age is therefore also called the "Peacock Age" In men's costume, the long tunic of the time of Henry VIII, the enormous puffed sleeves and shoes, gave way to a doublet fitting close to the figure, with tight sleeves, surmounted at the shoulders with small puffings and at the neck by a high close collar edged with a frill, whilst short and round upper hose or breeches headed the long stockings and small pointed shoes, a short shoulder cloak with a rapier and dagger completing the costume. There were clearly two categories of shoes during the Elizabethan era. They were made of leather or, for the Upper Class velvet or silk. Shoes with high heels were created during the end of the Elizabethan era. In women's clothing, excessive exposure of the breast was peculiar to England at this time and deeply stirred the conscientious scruples of the Dean of Westminster. Shakespeare ridicules the fashion in old Lafeu's scornful speech about the 'snip-taffeta fellow', the 'red-tailed humble-bee', "whose villainous saffron would have made all the unbaked and doughy youth of a nation in his colour." (All's Well that Ends Well, IV. v. 2-4)

Some of the styles that endured throughout the Renaissance included slashing, where the outer clothing was cut in slits and the underclothing slightly pulled through, the ruff, a circular collar of starched and pleated fabric. Fans also became very popular accessories (especially in the court of Elizabeth I) after Columbus brought the first feather fan to Queen Isabella from the Americas. Catherine de Medici made the folding fan popular. Handkerchiefs also became important in signifying wealth and power. Even laws were passed

prohibiting the lower class from using them. They became increasingly decorative, edged with lace and embroidered exquisitely. Lace and perfume made their first appearances during the Renaissance.

At the beginning of the Renaissance, clothing started to become rounder and fuller. The farthingale was perhaps the biggest contribution of the Renaissance. When first used, it was conical in shape with wire hoops graduated in size (often called a "Spanish farthingale"). However, by the end of the era it had widened into a conical barrel shape ("French farthingale"). Skirts also became shorter so they might show pretty high-heeled shoes and even glimpses of stockings. Needless to say, during the entire Renaissance the desired female figure was shifting to a silhouette of wide shoulders, a long, narrow waist, a flat chest, and full hips, which was mostly modelled after the influential figure of Elizabeth I. Another interesting phenomena with women's fashions was that women would pluck their foreheads and sometimes entire eyebrows to have the appearance of a high forehead, and therefore intelligence, which was so worshipped during the Renaissance.

Our knowledge of Shakespeare's costume is derived mostly from paintings. The fine arts in England, during the Tudor and Stuart eras were dominated by foreign or imported talent, such as Hans Holbein the Younger under Henry VIII and Anthony van Dyck under Charles I. However, a native school of painting was developing: Nicholas Hilliard, a trained goldsmith as well as painter, is the most widely recognised figure, and stands as the first great British artist about whom much is known. His first dated portrait of Queen Elizabeth dates to 1570 bear testimony to the fashion of his times. George Gower, moreover – a fashionable portrait painter who worked at Elizabeth's court – has also begun to attract growing recognition as knowledge of him and his work has increased. And it is from these paintings that we discover that the costumes used in the Globe could be divided into distinct categories: "Ancient", which was out of style clothing used to represent another period; "Antique", older additions to contemporary clothing to distinguish classical characters; Dreamlike, "fanciful" garments for supernatural or allegorical characters. As in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and finally, "Traditional" costumes that were intended to set apart a specific group of people.

Literature derived from the observation of art is one such area of harmony, and the reverse is only an inevitable action, bound to happen. While creative minds indulged in ekphrasis, painters attempted its reversal, leading to results that retained its significance over years. This unique yet inevitable marriage held its own, and with time, has developed as surprising complements to each other. Thus, as a form of art goes beyond its restrictions, encroaches into a sister art, and the resulting osmosis leads to a broadening of both the fields. Painters like Charles Hunt, Tadema and Millais have given detailed attention to contemporary attires in their depiction of scenes from Shakespearean plays through painting.



Children Acting the 'Play Scene' from "Hamlet," Act II, Scene ii (1863).

Hunt's painting shows the conical farthingale prevalent in Elizabethan England.



A Midsummer Night's Dream in paintings by Edwin Landseer and Fuseli (based on A Midsummer Nights Dream act IV, scene I) show "Dream-like or fanciful clothing" used as a part of the elaborate stage-craft.



Antony and Cleopatra, 1883. Painting by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, The leopard skin adored by Cleopatra in Tadema's painting is a symbol of power and opulence.



In his painting "The Drowning of Ophelia", Millais has depicted the flowers as Ophelia's floral communication. The flowers seem to merge along with Ophelia's dress in a way that shows her becoming one with the nature around her as she dies.

Shakespeare's plays in the Globe were frequented by the nobles and groundlings alike. Sir John Gilbert's 1849 painting infuses many a characters from different plays in one place and significantly illuminates the diversified sense of fashion constructed to suit their roles.



Sir John Gilbert's 1849 painting: *The Plays of Shakespeare*, containing scenes and characters from several of William Shakespeare's plays.

The importance Shakespearean plays laid on clothes is apparent from the many references partaking to dress that impregnate the plays:- Falstaff complains that his skin is like an old lady's loose gown (*Henry IV*, III. iii). Portia, describing her English admirer, says:- "I think he bought his doublet in Italy, his round hose in France, his bonnet in Germany." (*Merchant of Venice* I. ii. 78-80) In *Taming of the Shrew*. IV. iii. 55-7, Shakespeare comments, "With silken coats and caps and golden rings,/ With ruffs and cuffs and farthingales and things;/ With scarfs and fans and double change of bravery." Friar Laurence tells Juliet:- "Then—as the manner of our country is—/ In thy best robes uncover'd on the bier,/ Thou shalt be borne to that same ancient vault." (*Romeo & Juliet* IV. i. 109-11). Mistress Page, discussing Falstaff's disguise, reflects that "There is no woman's gown big enough for him, otherwise/ he might put on a hat, a muffler, and a kerchief, and so escape." (*The Merry Wives of Windsor* IV. ii. 73-6). Lady Macbeth's gentlewoman says: "I have seen her rise from her bed, throw her night-gown upon her." (*Macbeth* V. i. 5-6). In *Much Ado about Nothing* (II. iii. 146-8) Shakespeare writes: "She'll be up twenty times a night, and there will she sit in her smock till she have writ a sheet of paper." As in Act V. ii. 271-272 of *Othello*, attentive readers encounter "O, ill-starr'd wench!/ Pale as thy smock!". Hero speaks of a present of gloves in *Much Ado about Nothing* (III. iv. 61-2) "These gloves the count sent me; they are an excellent perfume". And Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale* (IV. iii. 222) advertises, "Gloves as sweet as damask roses." Attentive to the minute details, Shakespeare also alludes to the most expensive kind of velvet, cut in three heights: "Thou art good velvet; thou art a three-piled

piece, I warrant thee. I had as lief be a list of an English kersey as be piled, as thou art piled, for a French velvet.” (Measure for Measure I. ii. 33-7)

Post-Elizabethan England experienced radical changes in the socio-political scenario that had its mark on the fashion and costume of the age. Although in between 1642–1660, all public stage performances were banned by the Puritan rulers, during the Restoration period, in elaborate London playhouses, designed by Christopher Wren, Shakespeare's plays were staged with music, dancing, thunder, lightning, wave machines, and the texts and costumes "reformed" and "improved" for the stage. Shakespeare's plays continued to be performed in contemporary costumes until about a hundred and twenty years ago when Charles Kemble and Macready startled theatrical London with their historically accurate and elaborate production. In 1923, the first of a series of innovative modern dress of Shakespeare plays, *Cymbeline*, directed by H.K. Aylliff opened at Barry Jackson's Birmingham Theatre in England. Academy Award nominee costume designer Sandy Powell and Lisa Westcott invokes the Renaissance spirit of Shakespeare's times to life in the celluloid "Shakespeare in Love" (1998) where the audience spots Joseph Fiennes as Shakespeare in a green leather jacket, adopting the modernisation and evolution of fashion in the Shakespearean plays. British actress Emily Blunt garnered a Golden Globe award for her performance on "The Young Victoria" (2009) and the singularity in adapting the fashion of the age.

Just as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, attires serve as a medium through which the ambiguity between reality and illusion, is established. In *Merchant of Venice* or *Twelfth Night* attires dissolve the distinction between the genders. As many a plays employed boy actors in the place of female characters, the importance of attires to bridge this gap is infinite. The transformation, borrowing heavily to the particular times to which it belongs, is made even more apparent as we study the gradual progress from the Globe to their modern film versions. Bernhardt who through the first on screen performance of Hamlet in the "silent era" of films, brought Shakespeare's fashion from the theatre to the screen.

Along with adaptations like Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*; actors from Lawrence Olive, Mel Gibson, Ralph Fennes, Richard Burton, Ethan Hawke, Benedict Cumberbatch and Saheid Kapur to name a few, have influenced fashion by borrowing costumes from the periods to which they belong than maintaining a closer symphony with Shakespearean fashion and being historically accurate. The modern theatrical productions of the Shakespeare's plays in play houses or operas have a wider freedom when it comes to costumes, music and stage settings to enhance the visual and auditory faculties. Widely adopted by different genres not limited to the stage alone, the texts and fashion thus begin to be heavily influenced by the culture of the times.

In the era of graphic novels, *Much Ado About Nothing* or *Romeo and Juliet* who land up in Las Vegas are given a new dimension in their outfit to match the taste of their new readers. Hamlet metamorphoses into a brooding teenager with a trendy hair cut and *As You Like it* sports characters in very urban dress and gears. It is the universality of the plays that represent a sense of fashion that is also in evolution. The video game versions of plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also give the plays, characters and fashion a new dimension.

Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* and Japanese adaptations of the text that employ and contribute heavily to fashion, music and the like- being influenced by the country, state or times to which it belongs. Thus, emerged The Royal Shakespeare Society production of the

plays in an African culture, North Fulton Drama Club that produces Shakespeare's plays in a "punk culture"- all of which has its own distinct sense of fashion. The journey of fashion thus becomes one that passes through space and time, forever changing and evolving.

As the film and modern versions keep on altering and adding to the fashion of the previous generations, the question arises whether or not to enact Shakespeare according to his times or to give a more universal dimension to it. Adaptation is repetition. But repetition without replication. Linda Hutcheon in her essay *Beginning to Theorise Adaptation*, comments that "Adaptation such as film remakes can even be seen as mixed in intent: contested homage, Oedipally envious and worshipful at the same time." As early as 1926, Virginia Woolf, commenting on the fledgling art of cinema, deplored the simplification of the literary work that inevitably occurred in its transposition to its new visual medium and called film a "parasite" and literature its "prey" and "victim". Yet, she also foresaw that film had the potential to develop its own independent idiom: "cinema has within its grasp, innumerable symbols for emotions that has so far failed to find expression in words"

Charles L. Hayter complains about "updating" Shakespeare and Sir Alec Guinness in his essay "Shakespeare in Modern Dress" comments "I believe that modern dress will often pay rich dividends in presentation. Our lack of knowledge of ancient costumes would let these often important points of character and situation pass unnoticed. Modern dress will often breathe fresh air on an old play and give it a fair chance of revaluation, firmly pointing out how little the human heart changes through the centuries, and how remarkably alike we are to our forebears"

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