



‘Strange Habits’

Clothes, Climes, and the Environment in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries

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‘Her clothes spread wide / And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up’: water-infused climes and clothes on the early modern stage.

Vulnerable to wind and rain, sixteenth-century clothes often protected the wealthy and exposed the needy. Water could make colours fade and could rapidly penetrate the skin, the last frail barrier between the human and the environment. The sartorial-stripping metaphor which informs *King Lear* famously literalises the washing away of sins and stains that takes place in the storm. No wonder if, onstage, clothing allowed the audience to identify the atmospheric conditions promoted by the play they attended, and to detect situations of weakness and imbalance. Early modern England was fascinated by the agency of moisture, which partly helps explain why early modern drama so frequently highlights bodies impressed by water, directly or indirectly, metaphorically or visually.

Gertrude’s powerful description of Ophelia’s ‘clothes spread wide’, making the wretched girl mermaid-like, illustrates the commingling of body and water as ‘garments, heavy with their drink’ lead her ‘[t]o muddy death’ (*Hamlet*, 4.7). In this case, the watery weightiness of Ophelia’s clothes can only be imagined, as hers is an offstage, ob-scene death. Other instances of visible watery scenes are numerous, though. Like his contemporaries, Shakespeare often produced wet clothes onstage, as in *The Tempest* where, in the opening act of the play, ‘Mariners [enter], wet’. Water must have made stage costumes particularly heavy and slowed down the actors’ movements. *The Tempest*’s stage direction, conventionally associated with a shipwreck, provides spectators with a freeze frame of sorts: it both marks a decisive shift from the ordinary to the extraordinary and designates the beginning of a rebirth process. Water could of course also symbolize chaos and finitude. While *Lear*’s ramblings under a stormy sky testify to the association of rain, tears and folly in the cultural imagination of the period, Feste’s rain song, in *Twelfth Night*, alludes to the liquefying world of the denouement. The Fool’s damp garments must have done as much to draw the audience’s attention as his depressing rhetoric.

A garment made wet had a rubbed and irregular look that necessarily produced new levels of significance. This paper will thus explore water in connection with stage-dress as an agency of meaning. It will analyse the emotional and visual power of rain-soaked clothes on the Shakespearean stage, and, beyond that, it will try to understand how water interacted with performance in the early modern period.