



# ‘Strange Habits’

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

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### **Fashioning Falstaff: Dress and Disguise in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor***

When it comes to identity formation in the early modern period, fashion and self-fashioning are inevitably intertwined. In times of sumptuary laws, the apparel tends to proclaim the person beneath. Simultaneously, the humanist focus on individuality heightens an individual’s desire to express interiority through visual markers like garments. Dressing oneself is always an addressing of an external audience. On the Shakespearean stage, the characters impersonated by the actors are known by what they wear. In the play texts, sartorial metaphors have an effect upon how they are represented and perceived. With the figure of Falstaff as a connecting link, my paper examines the role of dress and disguise for the fashioning of dramatic selves in Shakespeare’s two-part history *Henry IV* and in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Clothes in these dramas function as social and psychological signifiers. With a counterfeiting knight and a role-playing prince among their protagonists, they exemplify the interplay of inwardness and outer appearance that is characteristic in the constitution of vestimentary identities. In *Henry IV*, prince Hal’s identity crisis manifests itself as a cross-class self-exploration between throne and tavern shaped by an understanding of the powerful symbolism of crown and stockings alike. In *Merry Wives*, masculinity is threatened through the intimacy of female laundry and the transvestite performance of boy actors causing confusion in fairy dresses.

This paper argues that in Shakespeare the alteration of appearance by means of attire is charged with transformative powers. Dressing and cross-dressing are central to these plots just like processes of persistent (self)-fashioning are the essence of the theatre itself. In my final analysis, then, Falstaff is identified as the epitome of a player’s fragmented identity, with the cloth he orders to cover his off-stage dying body with as this clothes-obsessed character’s final costume change.