



‘Strange Habits’

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

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‘...bear your body more seeming, Audrey’ : Costume and Shakespeare’s Bodies

The theatrical history of Shakespeare can be written through stage costumes. Directors, designers and actors have claimed Shakespeare plays as flexible spaces in which to exercise their own ideas about the work. In all productions, costume choices can be read, in varying degrees, as signifiers of the Protean nature of Shakespeare interpretations. During four hundred years of comparatively uninterrupted staging of his plays, costume traditions have been created, challenged, subverted, transformed, rejected, rediscovered, recycled, mashed together, stripped down, deconstructed and reconstructed. Theatrical records suggest a result that is best described as ‘not too far and not too near’. For the modern, not quite here and for the historic past, not quite there also apply. Today costumes have ranged from those with futuristic LED lights and computer-generated designs to those with meticulous detail to historical accuracy in in the ‘original practice’ movement. However, even the most authentically reconstructed Elizabethan garment must, of necessity, be tweaked to accommodate a twentieth-century body. These shifts are a part of the story. Even when previous centuries favoured contemporary clothes as costumes for the historic past, theatricality triumphed. ‘Strange Habits’ is a phrase that perfectly describes the long and intricate costume practices in Shakespeare productions – a record of conceptual fluidity partnered with economic pragmatism.