



# ‘Strange Habits’

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

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**‘We’re all male to th’middle, mankind from the beaver to th’bum’:  
Ambivalent Fashions and the Fashioning of Gender in Middleton's City Comedies**

Beyond the well-studied character of Moll Frith, the female who dresses as a man and whose gender ambivalence is central to *The Roaring Girl*, Middleton frequently addresses cross-dressing in his comedies, both within the convention of boys playing female parts, and through the recourse to tricks whereby a male character passes himself off as a woman. While both of these devices are shared with Shakespeare (*Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It* etc) and other playwrights (see for instance Ben Jonson’s *Epicæne*), Middleton’s approach differentiates itself through its precise reliance on the vocabulary of fashion and the materiality of clothing, underlining with surprising precision the ways in which the shape of a doublet can make a male costume appropriate for a woman and vice-versa.

This paper will study the ways in which Middleton generates and cultivates gender ambivalence through the materiality of fashion in several city comedies, including *A Mad World, my Masters*, *Your Five Gallants*, *The Roaring Girl*, but also in his satirical texts such as *Microcynicon* or *The Black Book*.