

Clothes on the Shakespearean Stage

Costumes were the most expensive part of staging a play in the Elizabethan era. Since textiles were extremely valuable, stage costumes were often bought secondhand, and would have been similar to what the audience would have encountered or worn in day to day life (the word “costume,” as distinguished from everyday “clothing,” was not in use during Shakespeare’s day). References to dress are peppered throughout *Much Ado About Nothing*, drawing on the audience’s shared understanding of the clothes they were seeing. Dress provided a common vocabulary that a playwright could use to signal – and complicate – categories of class, gender, and nationality. Below, you can see examples of fashionable dress from the era when *Much Ado* was first published, at the end of the 16th century. While those who could afford to have portraits done were wealthier than the average Elizabethan, most people would have worn the same basic items of clothing, albeit with toned-down fabrics and a less voluminous shape or silhouette.

Ruff: made of starched linen, supported by a stiffened frame and often edged with lace. The word “rebato” could refer to either the ruff or the frame supporting it.

Smock: basic linen garment which served as underwear. The lace neckline is just visible above the stomacher. It could be changed or “shifted” to keep clean in lieu of bathing.

Cuffs: could be turned back as in this example, or ruffled. Often detachable from the smock to make laundering easier.

Skirts: the elaborate drum shape of the skirts was created through the use of a stiffened structure called a farthingale. This example is a French “wheel” farthingale, which replaced the bell-shaped Spanish farthingale towards the end of the 16th century.



Artist unknown. Possibly Lady Arabella Stuart, ca. 1595–1600. Oil on panel; 18.7 x 13.3 cm (7 3/8 x 5 1/4 in). London: National Portrait Gallery, NPG 1723. Purchased, 1914. Source: NPG.

Headwear: the word “tire” could refer to a woman’s headdress. This lady wears a bonnet in addition to her jewelled headpiece. It would have been unseemly for a married woman to go around with her hair uncovered.

Stomacher: decorative panel pinned into place to fill in the front of the gown, often elaborately embroidered.

Sleeves: Hanging sleeves (or “side sleeves”) were an extravagant display of extra fabric. The full length sleeves which cover the arm could be extremely voluminous, held in shape with stiffened supports.

Gloves: a popular accessory for both men and women, often decorated with embroidery. Commonly exchanged as a sign of love — Claudio gives Hero a pair after their engagement.

Busk point: lacing (or “points”) secured the gown and skirts to the stiffened “bodies” which gave the torso its conical shape and supported the garments atop it.

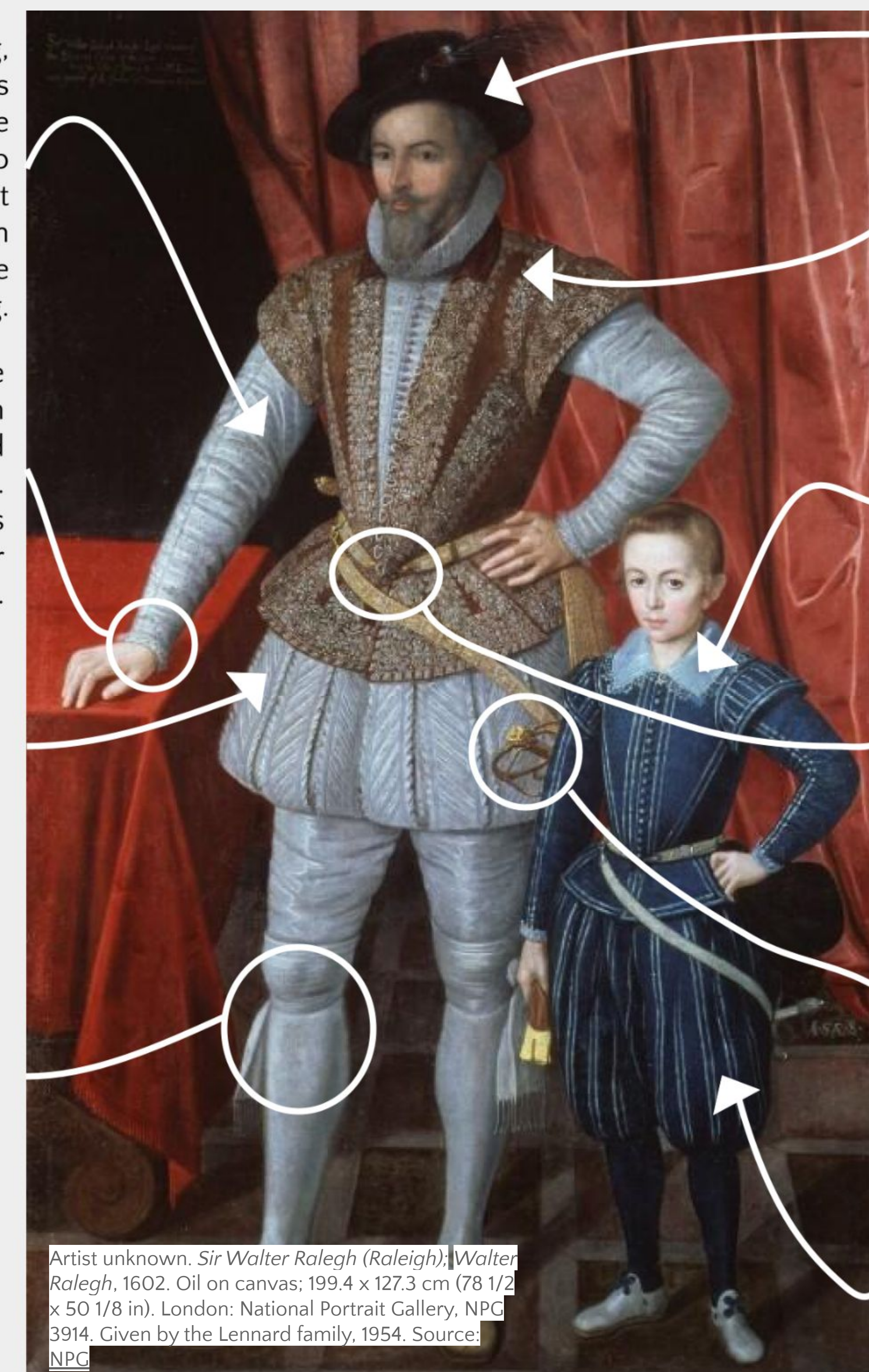
Doublet: a tight-fitting, long-sleeved garment with skirts of varying length. Eyelets at the edge of the doublet attached it to the hose with lacing (“points”). It was closed with buttons, which were associated with masculine clothing.

Cuffs: these ruffled cuffs, while evocative of the shirt worn beneath the clothing, would have been detachable from it. The shirt, like the women’s smock, was basic underwear for Elizabethan men.

Hose: bulbous “trunk hose” were often paned or slashed to show off the lining. The tighter “canions” covered the leg between the trunk hose and the stockings as the trunk hose grew shorter, emphasizing and idealizing men’s legs.

Garter: both men and women would have worn stockings, held up by garters. These examples are tied below the knee, but they could also be “cross-gartered,” (tied below and above the knee).

Cloak: while not seen in this painting, a short, impractical cloak was often worn over the shoulder by fashionable late Elizabethan men.



Artist unknown. Sir Walter Raleigh (Raleigh); Walter Raleigh, 1602. Oil on canvas; 199.4 x 127.3 cm (78 1/2 x 50 1/8 in). London: National Portrait Gallery, NPG 3914. Given by the Lennard family, 1954. Source: NPG.

Hat: Most respectable men would have worn some form of headwear, though it could be removed as a sign of respect.

Jerkin: an additional garment, without sleeves, which could be worn over the doublet. This example is unbuttoned to reveal the doublet beneath.

Collar: lace-edged, falling collars like this one would become more fashionable as the 17th century progressed, replacing the ruff.

Peascod belly: as the codpiece (padding in the front opening of men’s hose) went out of fashion, it was replaced by the padded front of the doublet or jerkin, which could protrude over the belt.

Rapier: a weapon, a sign of masculine honor, a fashion statement with an elaborate hilt — and an enabler of the violence which erupts in many of Shakespeare’s plays.

Venetians: a loose, longer alternative to the trunk hose.

As the remarks of moralists demonstrate, theater had the power to destabilize the simple readings of clothing that reinforced its categorizing capacity. Consider, for example, how different Hero’s behavior is when she’s undressed with Margaret and Beatrice than when she’s in public with Claudio — her clothes seem to shape the way she expresses herself, rather than the other way around. Clothing was supposed to make people *more* readable, but it could sometimes appear to hinder their readability. The conflict of *Much Ado About Nothing* shows us a crucial misreading of clothing: fashion, the “deformed thief” (III.iii.102), allows Margaret to steal Hero’s identity, with disastrous consequences. The rigidity of women’s garments, in particular, left their physical bodies “unreadable and potentially uncontrollable”¹ — the farthingale, for example, was sometimes called *cachenfant* for its perceived ability to hide pregnancy. Claudio’s anxiety over what Hero might be concealing beneath the “sign and semblance of her honour” (IV.i.28) thus reflects contemporary fears over what women might be hiding beneath their clothes. Learning about dress in the Elizabethan era can help us to understand the concerns that *Much Ado* is commenting on, but the Elizabethans were not the only ones anxious about clothing and control, nor were they the only ones making assumptions about others through the “reading” of clothing.

Costume designers depend upon our subconscious interpretations of clothing in order to communicate information about characters. *Much Ado* makes us aware, however, that when we attempt to “read” appearances, we’re engaging in an interpretive acts. We can’t stop ourselves from making these assumptions — but we can notice them. As you watch the play, how do you read the clothing of the characters on stage? What assumptions or cultural norms are contributing to that reading?

The 1920s were an era of dramatic change in fashion, particularly in women’s clothing. Designers like Coco Chanel pioneered more practical looks for women, including pants. Featuring a loose, androgynous silhouette, the “flapper” aesthetic was linked with a new liberated lifestyle — and provoked concerns over the potential immorality that could be associated with these new fashions. Categories of dress were once again being questioned — and as in the Elizabethan era, the destabilizing power of fashion provoked a moralistic response in the contemporary press.



Modern Girls Face Certain Disaster; "Flappers" Called Saddest Type Of All

LONDON, Eng., May 8.—“Girls with no aim in life but to walk up and down the streets, satisfied if they can get enough money to take them to picture palaces and keep them supplied with high heeled shoes.”

harm. They do not qualify for mothers or for wives and there is nothing before them but disaster. The streets of our towns are crowded with these little girls, fifteen and sixteen years of age, with no aim at all. For the most part they do typing or serve in shops and they just endure these few hours of work in order to be able to dress up and walk about in the evenings. No Love For Home. “In the wealthy classes we have found exactly the same thing—there is no love for home and very little respect for the parents. Their idea of life is to go to the picture palaces and to the clubs and to the hotels. According to Deputy Street Commissioners last Saturday.

SIS TRIES ON HER NEW BATHING SUIT



Images (clockwise from left):

“Typical Flappers,” Weekly Journal-Miner (Prescott, AZ), August 2, 1922.
Gabrielle (Coco) Chanel poses in a sailor top in the interwar period [1920].
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gabrielle_Chanel_en_matin%28C3%A8re.jpg
El Paso Herald (El Paso, Tex.), 08 May 1920. *Chronicle America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.
<https://chronicleamerica.loc.gov/loc/en8808472/1920-05-08/ed-1/seq-15/>
Americus Times-Recorder (Americus, Ga.), 31 May 1922. *Chronicle America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.
<https://chronicleamerica.loc.gov/loc/en89053204/1922-05-31/ed-1/seq-1/>
The West Virginian (Fairmont, W. Va.), 23 March 1922. *Chronicle America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.
<https://chronicleamerica.loc.gov/loc/en86072054/1922-03-23/ed-1/seq-1/>

In-Text citations:
1. Bendall, Sarah. *Shaping Femininity: Foundation Garments, the Body and Women in Early Modern England*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021. p. 220
All Shakespeare quotations are taken from *Much Ado About Nothing*. Edited by Francis H. Mares. Third ed., Cambridge University Press, 2018.