The “Making”-- and “Unmaking”-- of the Winter’s Tale: A Semiology of Costumes

by Allison Gormley.

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Dedicated to the memory of Umberto Eco (Jan. 5, 1932 – Feb. 19, 2016)

Keir Elam introduces the complexities of theatre semiotics by reminding the reader that “The drama had become (and largely remains) an annexe of the property of literary critics, while the stage spectacle, [is] considered too ephemeral a phenomenon for systematic study…” (5). Shakespeare’s works have long been critiqued dramatically, (“that composed for the theatre”) but the performance text, (“that produced in the theatre,” is often ignored (Elam 5). There is worth in looking at both the dramatic and performance aspect of a play, however “dissimilar” they can be (Elam 5). In analyzing both, one can discover a surprising disconnect between Shakespeare’s dramatic text and the physical performance of a play, especially when directors are desperate to be unique or to ‘reinvent’ a play that is hundreds of years old and produced with an array of designs. Design, direction, and an actor’s speech can alter the semiotics of a work, thus becoming a large influence, for better or for worse, in an audience’s interpretation. Design needs to be particularly vigilant in supporting, rather than distracting from, the power relations and hierarchy in a play due to its semiological system of visual symbols.

Montclair State’s recent Spring 2015 production is an example of design undermining the text of a play, due to semiological red-herrings. The plot of the Winter’s Tale is heavily
dependent upon the acceptance and disruption of clothing as “maker” of identity (Jones). In
Montclair State’s production, the director, Michael Bloom, chose to “modernize” the entire
production, (this term is used loosely as it was not set in a specific time), The production’s
anachronism (focusing here on its definition meaning an act of “attributing an object to a period
to which it does not belong”) failed to establish The Winter’s Tale intrinsic dependency on
clothing linked identity (“Anachronism”). Instead of establishing the context of the performance,
the costumes acted as semiological misfires that confused the inherent social hierarchies in the
world of the play and as a result, diffused the tension which would have been formed through
clothing-related destabilization.

Shakespeare wrote within a culture which was operating explicitly under clothing as a
“maker” of identity: livery, investiture, and Sumptuary laws all governed the attitude that
“clothes make the man” (Jones 2). Jones argues that “fabrics were central to the economic and
social fabrication of Renaissance Europe and to the making and unmaking of Renaissance
subjects” (Jones 14). In this culture, clothing is transformative, in the sense that it can create an
identity for its wearer. During the time of the English Renaissance “it was investiture, the putting
on of clothes, that quite literally constituted a person as a monarch or a freeman of a guild or a household servant. Investiture was, in other words, the means by which a person was given a form, a shape, a social function” (2).

The semiology behind appearance, specifically clothing-created identity, still resonates today:

For thousands of years human beings have communicated with one another first in the language of dress. Long before I am near enough to talk to you on the street, in a meeting, or at a party, you announce your sex, age, and class to me through what you are wearing-- a very possibly give me important informations (or misinformation) as to your occupation, origin, personality, opinions, tastes, sexual desires, and current mood (Capers qtd in Ponte 55).

While current culture may not be so prescriptive as to actually create laws, such as the Sumptuary Laws of the Renaissance, to specify which type of person can wear certain articles of clothing, modern audiences are still sensitive to the semiological transactions that take place through clothing and costume: “Clothing after all is communication: something that can be said, something that can be understood, something that can be read” (Hunt qtd in Ponte 54). The successful on-stage communication of a story through costume has high stakes because plays are time sensitive artforms in which the audience needs to glean a character’s background information in a short amount of time. Directors and designers, therefore, need to have a “precise vestimentary code” when deciding which articles of clothing, and in what order, appear onstage (Barthes qtd in Fortier 30). If there are any unnecessary signs onstage it could cause an audience’s “failure to recognize the signatum” and “subjects a work of art to potential distortion or loss of meaning” (Matejka and Titunik x).

The “precise vestimentary code” of Renaissance England were the Sumptuary laws which “detailed how individuals could spend their resources, particularly with respect to excessive displays of clothing and to food consumption” (Ponte 52) The laws mainly focused on
clothing and “played an active role in identifying and codifying one’s position in the social hierarchy, since the social elites believed that attire should reflect an individual's occupation, class, gender, race, and ethnicity” (Ponte 53). This was important to keep people visually categorizable and to prevent the threat of upward mobility or social equality from materializing (Muzzarelli 597, 609). Although “the difficulty, if not the futility, of enforcing them was fully apparent to everyone” these laws still existed as a way for people in power to exert their “privileged positions in society” (Ponte 54-60).

In order to be motivated enough to make laws that enforce the adherence to a visual social hierarchy, and make power semiologically measurable, high ranking Elizabethans had to also admit their own power was controvertible in the sense that it was asserted through clothing that is easily changed or “detachable, that they can move from body to body” (Jones 5). Jones writes on the power of clothing, stating “that is precisely their danger and their value: they are bearers of identity, ritual, and social memory, even as they confuse social categories” (5). While clothing conventionally emits the social hierarchy of a wearer, it is possible for people to alter their clothing and, as a consequence, project a new identity. The fear of a clothing free-for-all in which anyone can wear whatever they please (arguably the system we have in place today) encourages disguise of economic and social power.

This fear of people appearing a class they are not was also seen through the “rules” of Neoclassical theatre. Prescriptivists of this theater, which preceded English Renaissance theater, believed that plays should have “decorum” and verisimilitude—meaning that characters and actions in the plays needed to be realistic and easily identifiable. Neoclassicists discouraged disguise or characters acting and dressing inappropriately according to their social rank. Sumptuous dress was not acceptable (Goldfarb and Wilson 152, “Introduction to Theater”).
attitude behind these “rules” could be connected to the fear, and encouragement, of social mobility. Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists rebelled against the ideas of Neoclassical theorists, often having characters disguise themselves as different genders or class, such as Autolycus in *The Winter’s Tale*. Although Shakespeare rebels against verisimilitude and sumptuary laws, he needs to first acknowledge or establish the audience’s preconceptions of clothing in his plays, in order to subvert them.

This is why directors and designers need to establish a clear semiological code for the audience especially in a play like *The Winter’s Tale* since it is rich with references to clothing and appearance, and more specifically, the wrong clothing. Characters of nobility dress down as a disguise; Florizel to win the heart of Perdita, while Camillo and Polixenes dress in lowly disguise to spy on him. On the other side of the spectrum, there are characters who dress in an inappropriately sumptuous way, to give the illusion that they are nobility in this case Perdita, Autolycus, and the Shepherd with his son.

Designing a Shakespeare play in a different period than Elizabethan England is a common practice and often very successful. Many contemporary revivals of Shakespearean plays are effectively set and designed in a different, possibly more modern, time-period. The success of these productions depends on the specificity of the time period, the context of the time, and the audience's’ preconceptions of the setting. However, in the case of Montclair State University’s *The Winter’s Tale*, the time period was never established. This devalued the play rather than acting as a support for the text, (especially when the plot is heavily based on clothing and disguises. Veltrusky, theater semiotician, stated that “All that is on the stage is a sign” (qtd in Fortier 25). It is easier for the audience to compose meaning out of the “semiotic shipwreck” on stage when the design/ direction uses an audience's conventional knowledge to facilitate
understanding (Pavis qtd in Fortier 25). One “strategy is… to view the performance not as a single sign but as a network of semiotic units belonging to different cooperative systems” (Elam 7). These cooperative systems need to work together, not detract meaning when measured against each other (Foucault 184). Montclair State’s production had influences from many different times and settings, which became disorienting and hindered meaning when signs onstage confused one another.

In the first half of The Winter’s Tale, Sicilians appeared to be dressed in a cold palette with clothes that were modern almost to the point of a futuristic dystopic. This appeared to be the aesthetic of the production, that is, until We reached the second half of the play that takes place in Bohemia.
The Bohemians seemed to jump back in time with a warmer palette with influences from the rural American South in the 1930s, American flower children from the 1960s, and gypsies descended from Eastern Europeans. The influences were broad, yet from the audience’s perspective, disorienting. Having time specific garments from different eras, such as windbreakers, tailored suits, fur vests, trench coats, and flower crowns, alerted the audience to their origin, but not how they fit the plot or to bolster the text.

When Autolycus’ ballads become CD’s, any semblance of a time period is defenestrated; the context of the costumes relationships to one another is lost.
As you can see in the picture, Perdita is dressed in a flowy embroidered skirt while Florizel is shirtless in a plain vest. Where we find dissonance in this specific costuming, is that it obfuscates their class, which is what the entire second half of the play rests upon. We know that Perdita is dressing up when Florizel states “These your unusual weeds to each part of you/ Do give a life-no shepherdess, but Flora/ Peering in April’s front” (IV.4.1-3). Florizel is noting that Perdita’s clothing is “unusual” because she is dressed formally for the imminent sheep-shearing feast. Her “weeds”, a play on the word for clothing and a hint that Perdita has decorated herself with flowers, make her appear as a higher class- goddess-like (in this case, Flora, the goddess of nature and flowers). This is an example of the transformative power of clothing-- Perdita, out of her shepherdess garments, appears to be higher class. Camillo even questions the contrast of her lowly status and high born appearance by noting “Nothing she does or seems/But smacks of something greater than herself,/ Too noble for this place” (IV.4.157-9).

Although Florizel seems comfortable disguising himself Perdita is not. She responds to Florizel’s compliments,“ I should blush/ To see you so attired, swoon, I think,/to show myself a
glass” concerned about the implications of the unspoken Sumptuary laws that exist in the structure of the play (IV.4.7-10, 12-14).

Florizel’s royalty is “obscured” in a “swain’s wearing” while Perdita feels her beautiful attire is a prank, or a trick. Her “blush” anticipates the reaction of Florizel’s father, King Polixenes, if he ever saw him disguising his birth: “How would he [Polixenes] look, to see his work so noble,/Vilely bound up? What would he say?” (IV.4.21-2). Florizel, unconcerned with his father or their class-inappropriate clothing, responds to Perdita by remarking, “The Gods themselves/ Humbling their deities to love, have taken/ The shapes of beasts upon them,” (IV.4.25-7) This idea makes “humbling” a person’s appearance less criminal. If this is the case, Perdita’s sumptuous attire would be more offensive to Polixenes; “Or how /Should I, in these my borrowed flaunts, behold/ the sternness of his presence?” (IV.4.21-4). Perdita’s “borrowed” outfit is more reprehensible than Florizel’s because it undermines the idea of strict class hierarchies and supports the notion of social mobility—a dangerous concept for both the characters in the play, and the Elizabethan audience living under royalty. However, this dynamic changes when other characters, such as Camillo and Leontes (in disguise) join the stage.
The two men, in modern wind breakers and long false beards are attempting to blend in with lower-class bohemians. Their costumes, are very unlike the mixed gypsy/hippy attire of the Bohemians. Camillo and Polixenes are supposed to be dressing down as poor Bohemians. This was ineffective costuming because, while Camillo and Polixenes would be dressed casually against a group of modern characters, juxtaposed with the gypsy-like Bohemians they still looked as if they were of a much higher class instead of disguised—which was the intention.
The Shepherd and the Clown were intended to be lower-class Bohemians, like their party guests. Instead of being dressed in the gypsy attire, the two men were dressed reminiscently of American dustbowl farmers from the 1930’s. The audience had difficulty distinguishing between higher-class Bohemians, Camillo and Polixenes, and lower class Bohemians because characters who should be dressed similarly and from the same class are wearing vastly different apparel. Relationships were lost due to the indecipherable semiological communication, or lack thereof.

In the text, the Shepherd and the Clown reap the benefits of clothing— as transformation. They achieve social mobility but only after they validate it through their clothing. The only way they are able to achieve gentlemen status is by being associated with existing royalty (after the discovery that Perdita, the Shepherd’s adopted daughter and the Clown’s sister, is actually the daughter of Leontes). The Clown explains this transitive relationship by saying, “the two kings called my father brother; and then the prince my brother and the princess my sister called my father father; and so we wept, and there was the first gentlemanlike tears we ever shed” (V.2.137-41). To prove they have ascended in greater status, the Shepherd and his son appear “in the blossoms of their fortune” (V.2.123). Blossoms, like Perdita’s weeds, are the outward attire which symbolically prove their rise in the social hierarchy.
The effect in MSU’s production was comic, seeing two country-bumpkin farmers exaggeratedly strut onstage in new suits, sunglasses, canes, and snapping selfies with a brand new smart phone. While their costumes were reminiscent of 1930’s America, the smart phone added a confusing anachronism, removing the focus from importance of the Shepherd and Clown’s newfound status and instead placing it on the gimmick of having a modern prop—interrupting the clothing-power dynamic. The smartphone was an example of semiotic misfire when it was juxtaposed with 1930’s farm clothing. Even with the fancy props, the Shepherd and Clown are aware that their gentlemen status is shaky and unconvincing. The Clown proceeds to demand that their clothing is recognized, and therefore their identity as gentlemen, validated. When he sees Autolycus he accosts him by shouting, “See you these clothes? Say you see them
not and think me still no gentleman born. You were best say these robes are not gentleman born. Give me the lie, do, and try whether I am not now a gentleman born” (V.2.128-31). Autolycus knows of their origin, yet still agrees by saying “I know you are now, sir, a gentleman born”, thus accepting the Shepherd and Clown’s new status by accepting their outward clothing-made identity.

Although he appeases the Shepherd and Clown by accepting their clothing, therefore their found status, Autolycus is the character who acts as destabilizer of social order. His acceptance of The Clown and Shepherd’s new identity could arguably be apart of his subversion since acknowledging them as gentlemen supports the idea of social upward mobility- an idea that supporters of sumptuary laws opposed. However in the production there were extreme disconnects between the costuming of characters, which obscured the relationships between the different classes. If these power dynamics are not established, Autolycus cannot successfully traverse the different classes. In the text, he does so by changing his outfit to fit the identity needed for his cons. On stage, this is hard to translate if the costumes of social classes are not distinct from each other.
His initial deception involves pretending to have been robbed to trick an innocent passerby (in this case the Clown) to assist him. When the Clown starts to help him up, Autolycus slowly steals his garments (giving him another identity to add to his repertoire). Autolycus draws attention to himself by shouting “O, help me, help me! Pluck but off these rags, and the death, death!” (IV.3.50-1). The biggest (fake) crime
committed against him was not that he was beaten or his money stolen, but that the pretend-
robbers took his clothes “I am robbed sir, and beaten, my money and apparel ta’en from me, and
these detestable things put upon me” (IV.3.59-61). He continues, saying that “O sir, the
loathsomeness of them offends me more than the stripes I have received, which are mighty ones
and millions” (IV.3.54-6). The thieves robbed his (pretend) noble-identity by taking his clothes.
By pretending to be a noble, Autolycus is offended at having to wear rags because his pretend-
status is much higher. Autolycus is aware of the play’s implicit clothing rules and accepts them
only to exploit them to his own advantage.
During the sheep-shearing, he puts on a false beard, new identity, and charms the party into buying his stolen wares. The beard conceals his identity as a known thief, and he makes double the profit by also stealing party-goers wallets.

Yet another costume change, Autolycus assists Florizel by trading outfits with him, so Florizel and, once safely disguised, can flee to Sicilia. Now in court robes, a new perceived identity, he dupes the Shepherd and the Clown to reveal information about the fleeing couple. At first the Shepherd and the Clown are not convinced he is from the court; “His garments are rich, but he wears them not handsomely” (IV.4.747-8). Autolycus convinces them through his traded attire: “Whether it like me or no, I am courtier. Seest thou not the air of the court from these enfoldings? Hath not my gait in it the measure of the court? Receives not thy nose court odor from me?” (IV.4.72-6).

Once convinced, the Clown and Shepherd reveal Perdita’s origin. Autolycus uses this information for his advantage, another successful exploitation which could only have been acquired through his clothing manipulation. While other characters in the play adhere to the standards of dress and use it to disguise their identity, Autolycus’ character accepts the clothing-related power hierarchy in order to exploit and abuse the system. Unlike other characters, his identity is rooted in his actions rather than his dynamic clothing. Autolycus’ antics are not
successful if semiological social order is not established. He cannot navigate the ranks if it is unclear of what those ranks look like, through clothing.

The lack of continuity throughout the costume design diluted the relationships that characters had with one another through their clothing and their successful or unsuccessful recognition of class. Ultimately, the design choices failed to serve the text. From the audience, the assemblers of signs and meanings, it was difficult to tell which characters were of different classes because their costumes were from varying time periods. The ability to determine whether a character is deviating or adhering to the play’s unspoken Sumptuary laws is vital for a play where the tension and drama is based on a power-structure made visible through clothing. Appropriate costume design is key for successful productions of *The Winter’s Tale*, a plot whose “social fabrication” is dependent on clothing (Jones 14). The hierarchy becomes muddled when anachronism is the aesthetic of a production.
Works Cited

“Anachronism”Dictionary.com


Photographs:


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