Tudor Clothes

In 'Twelfth Night', the characters talk about court and status. There are two courts in the play – the court of Duke Orsino and the court of the lady Olivia, both of whom are wealthy. Inside the court are family members and friends, stewards and servants who all understand each other's wealth and importance. In the time of Shakespeare, the audience would share this understanding of status and identify with the different characters. However, this understanding is challenged when identities are swapped and tricks played.

In Elizabethan times, fashion was used to show a person's status and identity, including gender, rank, citizenship, profession, age, and courtliness. When Shakespeare's plays were staged the clothing would reveal a character's gender, social status, origin, and occupation.

Clothes would be made of natural fabrics such as wool and linen, or if you were more wealthy silk or velvet. The colours, buttons and detail all demonstrated how rich someone was and particular clothes were only acceptable to wear if you had a
certain status.

Unlike today when it is mainly seen as a hobby, knitting in Elizabethan times was a regular task. Families had to be supplied with warm clothing (caps, hats, hose, etc.) and these items could not always be bought. Knitting was an important job that had to be done alongside all kinds of other household tasks during the working day.



Turned wood knitting sheath
CC-BY-NC-ND Image Courtesy of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust

The 'knitting sheath' was a simple wooden tool that, with practise, made knitting easier. One knitting needle was held and the sheath was tucked into a belt or apron which left a hand free to control the yarn, stir a pudding etc. It meant one-handed knitting was possible.

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Twelfth Night
History

In Shakespeare's lifetime, people wore underclothes called shifts, smocks or shirts which were generally made from linen. Linen was practical and could soak up sweat. Woollen dresses, jackets and men's breeches were often lined with linen fabric.



Gentleman's nightcap c. 1601-1625
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Coifs (or ladies' bonnet-style caps) were worn by women over their hair and were both practical and symbolic. They kept the hair neat and provided warmth both in and outside the house. They also indicated status.



Blackwork coif (cap) c. 1600-1700
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This gentleman's nightcap dates from around 1610, and while it is made of linen, it is also richly embroidered with coloured silks and silver gilt thread.

Blackwork refers to the use of black silk thread on a white linen background, and was thought to have been made popular in England by Catherine of Aragon.

Ruffs were also made from fine linen which was starched to hold its shape when pleated. Elaborate lacework might be added as an extra detail. The fashion of the ruff evolved, beginning simply as the ruffles which appeared when a shirt was tied at the neck to become the larger ruffs fashionable as the sixteenth century progressed.

Ruffs got messy very quickly because they were worn very close to the face. So they needed cleaning a lot. This was a time-consuming and expensive process as it required the ruff to be completely unstitched, washed, starched again, and then restitched into place. The cost of maintaining an immaculate ruff helped to reinforce its status as a high-end piece of clothing.

The colours and dyes of the clothes were also important. If someone was dressed in black, they were likely to be very wealthy as the amount and cost of the dye needed for black cloth meant it was only available to rich families.

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Twelfth Night
History

This portrait dating from the 1630s of a mother and child, illustrates the custom of boys wearing dresses until about the age of seven. Before a certain age, boys and girls were often dressed the same. It was only when boys were breeched (put into trousers or breeches) at around the age of six or seven, that they assumed their adult gender identity.



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Therefore, it was not that boys were dressed as girls, but that children were dressed as children, with no distinction between the sexes.

Shakespeare refers to the act of dressing several times in his plays.

For wealthier women and men in Shakespeare's time, getting dressed was not a simple task as it required more than one pair of hands. Women had to be laced into their bodices (commonly called 'bodies' at this time) using a bodkin. A bodkin was like a long needle several centimetres in length with an "eye" at the top to thread the lace through. It was used in much the same way we might use a needle to sew with nowadays.

Sleeves would usually be laced or pinned in place to allow free movement of the arms. In this example, the sleeves have been stitched on to the bodice itself which would have been unusual at the time.



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Cloaks were worn by both men and women, and their length, fabric, decoration, colour and cost could vary considerably according to the owner's wealth and social status. Cloaks were listed in the wills and inventories of even the most ordinary people of Stratford-upon-Avon at this time.



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This pewter cloak clasp dates to around the 1560s. The richly dressed lady in the centre of the clasp bears a striking resemblance to Queen Elizabeth I.

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Activity

Look carefully at the picture. Can you correctly identify these items of clothing?

- Apron
- Breeches
- Coif
- Garters
- Hat
- Jacket
- Kirtle
- Smock
- Stockings/Hose



SBT Children Groups © Amy Murrell

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Activity - answers



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Activity - answers

Girls' Clothing	Description	Fabric
Coif	Hat	Linen
Kirtle	Dress	Wool lined with linen
Smock	Under shirt	Linen
Apron	Apron	Linen
Stockings/hose	Socks	Wool
Two garters	Laces to hold up socks	Wool
Belt and pocket	Worn round the waist	Leather

Boys' Clothing - ages 6 or 7	Description	Fabric
Hat	Hat	Linen
Jacket	Jacket	Wool lined with linen
Shift	Under shirt	Wool lined with linen
Breeches	Trousers	Linen
Stockings/hose	Socks	Wool
Two garters	Laces to hold up socks	Wool
Belt and pocket	Worn round the waist	Leather

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