

William Shakespeare between literary and fashion studies

Žarić, Stefan

Artis Center, Belgrade, Serbia; PhD candidate, University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Philosophy, Novi Sad, Serbia

Abstract

While both costume and fashion in William Shakespeare's *oeuvre* and its stage and screen interpretations have been studied in the West, Serbian fashion, theatre, and literary studies have not yet subjected Shakespeare's works to such analysis. As such, my doctoral thesis, conducted at the Department of English Literature at the University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Philosophy, aims to bridge that gap by analyzing multiple functions of fashion in regard to structuring female characters in Shakespeare's Great Tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear*). The paper will thus outline preliminary aspects of the thesis, demonstrating how fashion studies could be utilized in interpreting literary phenomena in Serbian academia, still wary of fashion as a valid discipline.

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Fashion and literary studies in Serbia

It can be argued that in the last decade Serbian fashion studies, including both historical study of fashion and its museological positioning, did rise to prominence, gradually liberating themselves from other humanistic disciplines. Nevertheless, ethnological, and anthropological, followed by art historical approaches to fashion are still dominant in the national academia. On the other side, problematizing fashion as an aspect of literature or applying fashion studies to literary studies is still largely absent in Serbia. Unlike pioneering studies in the West like Aileen Ribeiro's *Fashion and Fiction: Dress in Art and Literature in Stuart England* (2005); Cynthia Kuhn and Cindy Carlson's *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature* (2007); or *Fashion in Fiction: Text and Clothing in Literature, Film, and Television*, edited by Peter McNeil, Vicki Karaminas, and Catherine Cole (2009), there are still no similar academic projects in Serbia. Additionally, excluding a minor number of papers, mostly of student provenance, there are equally no studies that examine either national or world literature phenomena, be it specific periods, works, or authors.

This does come as a surprise given Serbia's rich and diverse fashion cultures positioned between the East and the West that have existed throughout centuries, especially in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, reflected in the national literary production. However, as Mirjana Prošić-Dvornić finds, Serbian literature by the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century did not contain many descriptions of clothes, but it did bear witness to representative cultural layers of urban life which would allow reconstruction of fashion imagery of that time. In that sense, not only can that literature serve as a valid source and material for structuring a more precise history of Serbian fashion, but also understanding fashion in literature can at the same time contribute to more a complex and

nuanced understanding of a literary phenomenon. Led by such absence of fashion and literature examinations, I have enrolled into a doctoral program in Language and Literature at the University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Philosophy, to conduct my doctoral thesis within the Department of English Literature. While still in the preliminary phase without final approval, the thesis, mentored by professor Dr Vladislava Gordić Petković, seeks to examine how female characters of William Shakespeare's Great Tragedies are constructed through fashion, and will be based on scientific merits of both philology and fashion studies.

“Visual Shakespeare”: Fashion, costume and Shakespearology

In the introductory remarks of *Shakespeare and Costume*, edited by Patricia Lennox and Bella Mirabella (2015) and *Shakespeare and Costume in Practice* by Bridget Escolme (2021), all three authors note that studying Shakespeare in regard to fashion and costume as an “interdisciplinary conversation” and a “semiotic project” was initiated only recently, particularly from the 1990s onwards. The first step, according to Lennox and Mirabella, was undertaken in 1992 by Jean MacIntyre and her book *Costumes and Scripts in Elizabethan Theatres*. Excluding the aforementioned studies, MacIntyre's book was followed by Robert Lublin's *Costuming the Shakespearean Stage: Visual Codes of Representation in Early Modern Theatre and Culture* (2011); Catherine Richardson's *Shakespeare and Material Culture* (2011); and Sarah Jane Downing's *Fashion in the Time of William Shakespeare* (2014). Downing emphasizes that garments and fashion feature in almost all his plays, occasionally even as the pivot of the story. Contrarily, Serbian Shakespearology has not yet been concerned either with costume or fashion as a means of analyzing Shakespeare's plays.

Back in 2007, in an essay titled *Shakespeare's Shadows*, Gordić Petković noted a rather alarming lack of innovativeness in Serbian Shakespearology, asking whether Serbian academia created its own and authentic Shakespearology at all. As the author states, approaches to Shakespeare in Serbia have either dealt with unnecessary biographic and reception syntheses or uninspiring summarizations of already established critical dogmas. As such, she introduces, among several others, the concept of “visual Shakespeare”, based on transformations of the verbal structure of Shakespeare's works as a domain of classical literature into virtual, visual, kinetic, graphic, new media structures as a means of not reading, but inscribing (and corresponding to) Shakespeare's works. Fashion studies, de facto belonging to the concept of visual Shakespeare, could thus be one of possible – and numerous – ways of modernizing domestic Shakespearology, as the proposed thesis aims to demonstrate. More importantly, as Escolme stresses, studying fashion and costume in Shakespeare's plays demonstrates how a cultural relationship with the past is reflected and interrogated through clothing, what it means, and what it allows Shakespeare to mean. In the case of my doctoral research, new layers of meaning will be uncovered and established by analyzing female characters and their fashions and fashion performativity in the so-called Great Tragedies: *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*.

While the complete *oeuvre* of the English writer is regarded as the true literary canon, the Great Tragedies have been, alongside *Romeo and Juliet*, internationally valued as the most popular Shakespeare's works, subjected to both traditional and radical interpretations. Considered a norm of the literary canon in Serbia, they have been studied to the extent that would reaffirm and confirm their canonical status as invaluable works of classical literature, at the same time disabling other, less “intellectual” and non-normative interpretations seen as a “threat” to their canonical status and the very notion of the literary canon. As nowadays fashion studies occupy academic and museum systems worldwide, there is no reason to perpetuate the cemented perception of fashion as a decadent product of Western capitalism that has emerged in Socialist

Yugoslavia, and has as such impacted the study of fashion or the lack thereof in the country. On the contrary, approaching canons of art history or literary history through fashion studies means giving agency to new forms of academic expression while enriching those canons as well.

Fashioning the Great Tragedies

Shakespeare's Great Tragedies were selected as the basis of my research for those exact reasons: their status as works of art is not questioned by academia, and by belonging to the drama genre, the study of costume (and fashion) is a valid way of re-evaluating their literary value. As such, analyzing fashion-historical narratives of fashion systems of the Great Tragedies from the viewpoint of material culture, fashion and costume studies will be put in the service of philology, in order to understand the construction of female characters in these works and the role fashion plays in that process. The research could thus lay foundations for a complex implementation of fashion and costume history in the corpus of literary history and theory in Serbia, paving the way for future analyses alike. To begin with, both "vestimentary frame" and "sartorial performativity" in all four tragedies will be established. As defined by Kuhn and Carlson, the vestimentary frame enacts a site of aesthetic, social, and political inscription of fashion, whereas sartorial performativity employs apparel and accessory as a symbol, image, motif, or metaphor. In that sense, the authors conclude that the written clothed body, as well as disembodied attire, function as a narrative element with multiple dimensions. To paraphrase, vestimentary frame and sartorial performativity thus include not only the geographical and historical framework of a fashion system presented in literature, but also the semiotic and multifaceted layers of fashion and its meanings too. In the case of Shakespeare's Great Tragedies, there are four geographically and historically different fashion systems, each enacting a different vestimentary frame and employing different sartorial performativity. Neither is—as many to whom I have mentioned my research assumed—set in Elizabethan England nor is based on Tudor fashion. However, contemporary fashions of Shakespeare's time certainly did impact the fashioning of his literary characters and their stage costuming even more so, as according to Russel Jackson, in Shakespeare's own theatres costuming was broadly contemporary but with significant conventional adjustments for some specific historical periods. Fashion cultures in the four Great Tragedies are as follows:

1. *Hamlet*: fourteenth to fifteenth century Denmark
2. *Macbeth*: eleventh century Scotland
3. *Othello*: sixteenth century Venice
4. *King Lear*: Pre-Christian Britain.

In that sense, analyzing the role of fashion in constructing the female characters of these plays will inevitably consider studying noted fashion cultures as well as their rendering through conventions of Elizabethan stage costume and fashion. As we can see, only one of the plays, *Othello*, is set within the framework of Renaissance fashion, whereas the remaining three tragedies are set in fashion cultures spanning from the early to the late Middle Ages, or the Early Modern age. Additionally, structuring of female characters through fashion is not defined only by time and space or the place they are positioned in, but their relationships with male characters and their own sociopolitical status. For example, Gertrude and Ophelia's fashioning is conditioned by Hamlet just as much as his mourning attire is by the two of them. Furthermore, Gertrude is fashioned in regard to the death of her first husband, King Hamlet, and in regard to her marriage with the new king, Claudius, whereas Ophelia's dress codes are conventionally conceptualized through the white dress representing her madness. While the presence of female characters in *Macbeth*—Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff, and the three witches—is brief, their reading through the lens of fashion studies could certainly give them more agency and

complexity, rather than reducing them, like in the case of Ophelia, to normative iconography. All three female characters in *King Lear*—Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia—are equally fashioned in regard to their marital circumstances, their relationship with their father, Lear, and their relationship with each other, with Cordelia being contrasted to Goneril and Regan. Besides *Hamlet*, *Othello* could be deemed as the most fashionable of Shakespeare's Great Tragedies, given the symbolism of the handkerchief Othello gives to Desdemona, and its function as a plot device.

As separate plays, both *Hamlet* and *Othello* have been subjected to a certain extent to fashion historical analysis, and to a larger extent to costume analysis. Notable among this are the essays *Apparel oft Proclaims the man: Dressing Othello on the English Renaissance Stage* by Bella Mirabella (2015), and *Hamlet, Mourning and the Disappearing Costume: Inky Cloaks and Solemn Black* by Bridget Escolme (2021), as well as insights in Lublin's *Costuming the Shakespearean Stage*. On the other side, neither *Macbeth* nor *King Lear* were subjects of fashion historical analyses, predominantly as fashion is indeed minor in both plays compared to *Hamlet* and *Othello*, although Cleanth Brooks in his 1947 essay *The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness* did touch upon the metaphor of clothes in *Macbeth*. The other reason could be that the fashion cultures presented in them (early Medieval Britain and Medieval Scotland) are not *locus communis* of fashion history.

Conclusion

The lack of such interpretations calls for a prudent scholarship, one that would include all four tragedies respectively and demonstrate how the worlds of these tragedies and the female characters inhabiting them are constructed—or can be constructed—through fashion, rather than, as most research shows, emphasizing how fashion in these plays is rendered through the costumes of Early Modern theatre. More importantly, such analyses can also cast a new light on Shakespeare's tragic heroines, often trapped by criticism and reduced to homogenous fashion symbols or images (Ophelia as madness, Lady Macbeth as anti-mother, Cordelia as virtue, etc.) rather than seen as heterogenous characters in whose construction fashion acts as a multidimensional narrative. In Downing's words, Shakespeare extensively explored what could happen if the strict rules of dress were transgressed, hence there is no reason, for Serbian or any other Shakespeareology, not to follow the steps paved by the Bard himself and explore fashion in his works.

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