

Investigation of the replication of medieval time period clothing  
through modern day textiles and processes

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### Abstract

This essay will investigate the origins of medieval clothing in order to accurately recreate them for theatrical purposes using more modern textiles and simplified methods. After exploring the characteristic items of a medieval wardrobe, the benefits of various textiles and processes will be investigated in order to recreate the garments through more cost efficient and practical means for a theatrical show. The analyzation of this European historic period begins immediately after the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 AD, which is a common marking point for the beginning of the Middle Ages, and ends around late 1200 AD, after the first of the Crusades were launched. The origins are explored in order to create a whole show's wardrobe that agrees with each other because of the slight differences and variations in clothing of each sections of Europe. The purposes of men's and women's everyday apparel is then explained, along with descriptions of each, aimed at focusing on the look, texture, and how each was created in historical times. The essay then goes into describing the armor of the medieval knights. Various ways and methods to replicate the wardrobes are then presented along with the benefits that these techniques create for both the costumer and actor. Theatre is one of the most universal ways of communication through the combination of audio and visual media, and fashion is one of the main means of identifying a historical time period. The overall conclusion states the importance of the accuracy of these replications and theatrical representations of the medieval period, which is to fully portray the era which had so much political and cultural influence on the world, even until present day.

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Costuming a theatrical production is a great task where much research must be done in order to accurately portray a given time period, realistically, while attempting to convince the audience that the actors and actresses are actual historical people brought into the present to relay a story. There are many aspects that must be taken into consideration when costuming a show, which include the time period, the origins and purposes of each garment, and how to precisely create a replication of each through very practical means, which must also be very efficient, money-wise. This topic is important to directors and those in charge of costuming, so as to help them replicate the clothing accurately, in the most efficient and cost effective way feasible. This is exemplified through various shows set in a medieval era, such as "Everyman", an English morality play. This essay will explore how today's modern textiles and simpler procedures may be utilized to mimic and recreate simplified and practical versions of historic clothing, specifically that of the medieval period, while also discovering the importance of the accuracy of the replications for theatrical purposes after the paper's analyzation of the early Middle Ages, from around 470 AD, to around the time of the first Crusades, around late 1200 AD, for the origins and influences of their basic apparel.

The Middle Ages, also referred to as the Medieval period, was marked by the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 AD and was the time period where most of western Europe was forced to rebuild it's community because of the ravaged state the land was left in by the Germanic tribes, who had destroyed most of the land on their infamous voyages. (Bishop 8) The barbarian invasions, including the Huns, had destroyed everything in their path, including the new networks that Europe had just installed to be able to communicate with each other at opposite ends of the continent, which created disunity

between the countries of Europe, tearing apart the once coalescing culture. The end result was a cultural lifestyle with influences from both the very religious and proper Europe and the warlike Germanic tribes. (Bishop 8-16)

The early Middle Ages was a time of the bourgeoisie, or middle class, emerging from the ranks of society as a group to recognize. During these years, up until late 1000 AD, Europe went through many rulers, including the Byzantine Empire, and Holy Roman emperor, Charlemagne. Around 1095 was the beginning of the Crusades, which distinguishes a change into the Romanesque period, where the fashion evolved into more elaborate styles and rich details, very different from the early period. (Bishop 90-107)

At the early stages of the medieval era, both men and women wore simple tunics made of linen and other light fabrics, due to simplicity. (Cosgrave 104) However, as the years went on and social classes became more defined, the women began adding belts to contour the tunics to fit more snugly and accentuate the curves of their body. There were also various garments added to the tunic to complete the outfit, and depending on what social class a person belonged to or your status and title within society. The fabrics used included linens and wool. (Cosgrave 106-108) To color their fabrics, they used natural materials to dye it to various colors. Browns, yellows, and greens were the easiest colors to achieve, using simple dyeing processes and used common plants. Reds were more complex, as were making blue fabric because of the more complicated dyeing processes and the scarcity of indigo around Europe. The colors could range from fairly bright to a more muted color, and depended on the quality of mordant, which was a fixing agent used in the dyeing process. Components used as mordant included mosses, whose use was later ceased due to the inavailability because of its endangered state, and also various

sources of iron. The quality of water used in the dyeing process also played a big factor in the quality of color of the resulting fabric. (Lothene.org) The colors used in theatrical productions should be used in accordance to each character, making more prominent characters' costumes in bolder colors, while others which are smaller and more outspoken more muted colors, to further relay and visually enhance the themes and message of the play to the audience, which is presented through dialouge and action. These color schemes also corellate with archetypal colors, where dark and dismal colors may be used for unfavorable and corrupt characters and brighter, "happier" colors being reserved for the "hero" of the play.

The beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> century marks the beginning of the first of the Crusades, which was one very big catalyst for the changes in wardrobe in during the Middle Ages throughout Europe. The Crusades were military campaigns initiated by the head of the Roman Catholic Church, or Papacy, at the time. The first of the Crusades began in 1096, when Pope Urban II launched a campaign to take back Jeruselum, or the Holy Land from the barbarian Turks. As a result of this line of religious and political campaigns to take what was "rightfully" the Catholic Church's. (Bishop 90-100) The cause for changes in clothing was all of the imported fabrics and accessories brought into Europe from other countries through trades. These fabrics were seemed very rich and were considered very luxurious at the time and included mostly Oriental fabrics like velvets, brocades, stains, and silks in very bright colors, as opposed to the dull and faded colors of the dyed linens from the earlier years. This created interest within the medieval societies and pushed the fashion into a more elaborate direction, which is exemplified in the later years of the Middle Ages, after the first of the Crusades. (Cosgrave 104-105)

In the early Middle Ages, women of the middle to lower class usually only wore very simple outfits, usually only a basic tunic over their under tunics, which were made from linen and lighter canvas material because it was very common and very inexpensive back then. Women of noble families, or the court ladies, exhibited more details by wearing over tunics, also called “super tunics”, over the basics, which flaunted embellishments such as jewels, elaborate embroidery, and silk borders to show how well off their families were. In addition to the tunics, they often wore long, floor-length cloaks and concealed their hair under long veils. (Cosgrave 102-104). Further into the 12<sup>th</sup> century, with the advancement of the Crusades, the women’s over tunics were replaced by an Oriental inspired item called a “bliaut”, which was fashioned from tight lacing and was more fitted at the hip to create more of a body and accentuate the female features. It gave the appearance of a long waist. In addition to the bliaut, a mantle was added, which was a fairly long piece of clothing that hung from the shoulders and trailed down the back, and was normally worn during various outdoor activities and made from heavy material, such as brocade or heavy silk velvet. (Yarwood 37) The lengths of the garments began growing longer and fuller, which accented the longness and elegance of a woman’s figure and movements. While the clothes of these noble ladies seemed fairly simple, the styles withstood time and lasted all the way up until the beginning of the Renaissance period, and influencing fashions in society within noble classes throughout time even afterwards. (Cosgrave 104)

The men’s clothing of the early Middle Ages were very simple, and mostly consisted of solely the tunics, both outer and under, along with very simple but practical accessories, such as breeches or cross-gartered trousers, which were later replaced by

hosiery, made from either knitted wool or linen, along with cloaks which fastened at the shoulders and cloth caps, which were usually round. In addition to all of these accessories, after the Crusades, the nobility of Europe even used fur trimmings as adornment to their garments, which really accentuated their high social status. The men's basic wardrobe stayed fairly constant throughout the 12<sup>th</sup> and into the 13<sup>th</sup> century, not noticeably and extremely varying until the very late 13<sup>th</sup> century, where the tunic took on a hood and began to take a different shape. (Cosgrave 104-106)

The major armor used during the Middle Ages was chain mail in addition to tabard and other metal plates. The additional armor plates were solely for the blocking of projectiles as the use of bows and arrows became more frequent in battle during the medieval era. These plates were sewn into the tabard, which was a very heavy cloth placed over mail, and decorated with the knight's coat of arms. Mail was very expensive, not because of the cost of materials, but because of the labor put into making the armor. The process used wire, made usually of either iron or pearlitic steel, both materials which weren't necessarily very strong, which was then formed into a large number of small rings, fastened together with a rivet, then linked together in an elaborate pattern to be more effective in battle. This procedure may have taken hours and even days to create an exemplary piece of mail. (Wikipedia.org)

In order for a costumer to make replicas of the tunics, armor, and other clothing of the Middle Ages in general, one must take into account the type of fabric used back then and find a similar one to replace it with that is both cost efficient and realistic looking when being compared to the actual, at least from a stage. In theatre, there are many innovations that may be used to allow something to look like an exact replica of a



medieval outfit without going through the pains and labors and without spending the money that one would need to if they wanted the actual apparel. These include using similar fabrics, and materials and reducing the actual amount of layers and clothing, and only using the outer garments.

The tunics, which were historically made from wool and linen, may be recreated with muslin, which is much more cost efficient. While the quality of the muslin may be noticeable at a personal distance, from a stage, the audience will not be able to recognize and distinguish the fabric from the more expensive linen it is attempting to mimic. Muslin is very easy to find, easy to dye, and is much more cost efficient than linen or wool. Muslin is also more compliant when being tailored, which is very important, considering the many alterations the fabric may have to go through to be effective during a show. Fabric dyes are very inexpensive these days and result in much richer colors than what the natural resources would, as in the past. They come in a variety of colors, which makes the task of replicating medieval apparel much easier because of the ability to match nearly any shade of any color, while there are other techniques that are commonly known using tea and other similar substances which help create an antique look to the costuming used for these medieval plays. (CostumeRing) The colors, decorations, and exact patterns of apparel varied, historically, according to geographical location, and what was made available to the seamstresses, material wise, therefore, in order to accurately replicate the attire of the medieval period, these factors must be taken into consideration and researched before creating a whole drama production's wardrobe.

The men's costumes may be fashioned from the same fabric, the muslin, for a more cost effective version of a tunic. The embellishments on the over tunics may be

made from synthetic gold fiber cords and from the plastic jewels found easily at craft stores. Faux fur may be found in any type, length, and texture and color. The benefits of using faux fur is that it is made of synthetic fibers and various artificial materials, which are environmentally friendly, where no animals are harmed in its production. These materials are very inexpensive and may be bought in bulk, while looking very authentic from an audience perspective.

The armor of the Middle Ages may be some of the most complex items to replicate for stage purposes because of the original materials the garments were made of and the processes used to create them. The tabard is usually made out of very heavy cloth, which could be recreated with either felt or canvas, both which give the effect of very heavy and rich fabrics that were used historically in the medieval period. The designs which make up the knight's coat of arms may be fashioned together as a quilt would, where small pieces of fabric can be pieced together to create a larger picture. The pieces of armor that were inlaid into the tabard may be created with simple cardboard cutouts which may allow for the look of real armor, while remaining lightweight, which would be very beneficial to the actor, and keeping the armor of the costumes very low budget. The chainmail may be reproduced through various means, which all slightly differ, but achieve the same effect of the very complex form of protection. The cheapest way to create chainmail from scratch, for show purposes, would be by use of steel wire and fashioning each individual ring from this spool. This route would require a longer amount of time to work on the project, but is the most cost efficient. Others require ordering the rings already pre-made rings, but are more expensive. (CostumeRing)

Metals other than steel may be used, such as iron and titanium, which is very lightweight,

and would be easier for the actor to move around the stage. All of these materials may be found at local hardware or craft stores. The rings are then linked together in patterns, which create somewhat of a “sheet” of the links, which is what was used during the Middle Ages in battle to stop the penetration of lances and swords of opposing assailants. These recreations not only provide for an authentic look, but also benefit the actor. Instead of having the burden to carry layers upon layers of metal, which is what was done historically, the costume would be modified to retain the same appearance, but weigh half of what it would in actuality. (Wikipedia.org)

The play texts which take place in the medieval period, and which these procedures and processes may be used include many moral plays, which reenact small stories derived from the Bible, such as the story of “Noah and the Flood”. Most of the plays that were written within the medieval period were miracle and morality plays, which were used by the Catholic Church to spread their ideas throughout the land, through means which the average middle-class man could understand. When these plays are performed, they usually retain the medieval aura by using set pieces and costume choices that mimic the historic period in which they were written. (Child)

One of the most well known play which takes place in the medieval period is “Everyman”, which was written by Peter van Deist during the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, as a morality play which has been and is revived very frequently, and is an excellent example to use to showcase the techniques and processes previously described in this essay to create a feel of the Middle Ages. “Everyman”, being an allegorical play to show that the character, Everyman, while attempting to find someone to help them reach salvation, discovers that the only thing that can truly save him is “Good Deeds” alone. No matter

when this is performed, this play is most commonly set up to make the audience feel as if they have been sent back into the medieval ages through the set, and more importantly through the costuming choices, which allow the play to be set in a more medieval setting. The more prominent and powerful characters of "Everyman" would be placed in more noble type clothing, which would include the very elaborate super tunics and capes, to show their authority over the more mediocre characters. These commoners, including Everyman, would be placed in the more homely tunics to represent exactly what his name represents: every man. (Child)

Medieval clothing is very practical and is mainly diverse in order to distinguish the various social classes from one another, whether it being nobility, which dressed in elaborate jeweled super tunics, or those of the middle class, which sported plain, more inconspicuous and basic tunics. There are not many garments from the time period that were unnecessary, especially the armor, which served a very important purpose of protecting the knights in battle. Under the supervision of an experienced seamstress or costumer, the replication of Middle Age clothing can be fairly simple with the use of patterns and common knowledge of the techniques needed to create these articles of clothing. The use of the more cost efficient textiles, such as muslin as opposed to the linens that were used during the actual times, can greatly benefit those who are sponsoring the theatrical production, to help them stay within their budget. Even with the research performed, there were still unresolved issues such as the amount of time it would take to recreate these articles of clothing, and what shortcuts or other means may be used in the recreation of a show's wardrobe when on a strict and straining time limit. Other reasons for choosing modern textiles over attempting to find authentic

costumes would be for the benefit of the actors. There are many instances where authentic clothing is not fit for the amount of action an actor may have to carry out for dramatic effects and purposes. In cases such as these, which include combat scenes and dance numbers, depending on the play or production, alternative materials may be used which lighten a garment, or make it so that movement was easier. Costume is one of the most important aspects of theatrical productions, which makes it essential for the entire wardrobe to be accurate. Theatre is a visual medium in which messages are conveyed to an audience, where the first things that the audience notices are the set pieces, and next, the costumes worn by the characters. The costumes should give the audience some sort of idea of what kind of character each actor is portraying at first glance, which sets the play up and foreshadows much of the proceeding conflicts and relationships between each character. The reason that the accuracy of the costume choices are so important when creating a theatrical production is because these choices greatly affect what time period a dramatic play takes place in because, in many instances, the environment or certain settings or a particular country or place do not differ as much as clothing and fashion of different eras. Fashion has always been a sign and way of identifying the times, and is a very strong mode in which the director may assist the audience in creating a stronger connection between their imagination and the story and events taking place on stage. The Middle Ages was a very prominent era in the history of the world, being a time of great change and becoming a huge influence for later eras in both political, economic, and cultural areas, including fashion. It is impeccable that all aspects of this instrumental period, in this case, especially the clothing, be represented in the most

accurate and respectable manner possible, in order to make theatre one of the most effective forms of media and communication.

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