Department of Apparel, Events & Hospitality Management

# "A Body Past Compare": *Romeo and Juliet* and the Language of Appearance

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## Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* has been performed all over the world for over 400 years, and yet it has never been studied exclusively from the perspective of appearance studies. This lack of research ignores the substantial correlation between language referring to appearance and the thematic content of the play itself. The researcher and advisor extracted and coded all references to appearance used in the play. After calculating reliability, the researcher and advisor met to determine the dominant themes of the data, discovering the dominant themes of *Destruction*, *Beauty Ideals*, and *the Hidden or Transformative Body*, and the minor themes of *violence*, *physical disability*, *the disappearing body*, *fairness*, *physical attributes*, *disguise*, and *fantasy*. These results enliven and enrich readings of the text, set a foundation for original costume designs by the researcher, and reveal a new way for designers to interpret and analyze texts for the purposes of costuming.

## Purpose of Study

The Purpose of this study was to:

- Evaluate use of appearance-based language in Romeo and Juliet
- Draw conclusions from the narrative analysis that reflect the themes of the play
- Design and construct costumes for the primary characters of Juliet, Romeo, and Mercutio to visually interpret appearance themes

## Background

William Shakespeare was a playwright who lived in England from approximately 1564-1616 (Ackroyd, 2005). Little is known about his childhood and education; it is assumed that he went to grammar school and learned basic Latin and composition (Cressy, 1975). It is believed that he arrived in London in approximately 1592 (Ackroyd, 2005), and it is in this early stage of his career that many scholars suspect he wrote Romeo and Juliet, as it aligns with the style of other early works such as A Midsummer Night's Dream (Gibbons, 1980).

**Romeo and Juliet.** Fundamentally, Romeo and Juliet is the story of a violent feud between two families, the Montagues and Capulets, and the consequences of this feud on the titular lovers and their associates. Over the course of the play, Romeo and Juliet attempt to wed, but their efforts are thwarted by the violence committed by Juliet's cousin Tybalt, the death of Romeo's friend Mercutio, and the rage of their parents. The play begins with violence in the streets, and ends with the untimely death of the lovers. Throughout, appearance is constantly referred to in ways that highlight both extreme physical beauty and extreme physical violence.

**Romeo and Juliet Costumes.** It is important to define costume design for the scope of this paper, as the end goal of this research is to produce costume illustrations and wearable, constructed costumes for a hypothetical production of Romeo and Juliet. Though "costume" is a term often applied to ambiguously denote dress (Roach and Eicher, 1992), in this paper "costume design" will rely on the definition put forth by Barbara and Cletus Anderson, which describes costume design as those elements of appearance in an actor or actress that express a character's personality and the broader themes of the text (Anderson & Anderson, 1984).

Because of Romeo and Juliet's long history, as well as its remarkable ability to adapt to various environments and contexts, a multitude of costume interpretations exist. The play has been costumed in a traditional manner that alludes to the Italian Renaissance (Thalberg & Cukor, 1936; Brabourne & Zeffirelli, 1968; Alberstat & Carlei, 2013), in clothing contemporary to its audiences (Bilcock & Luhrmann, 1996), and through perspectives that suggest new contexts and environments for the play (Al-Shetawi, 2013; Richardson, 2011). There is no constant element in how these previous costume designs portrayed character, setting, or theme: some productions emphasize the divide between houses, while others focus attention on the romance of the lovers. Previous costume designs have shown that there are no concrete rules to costuming this production: each designer brings their own ideas to the process, and draws their own themes from the text.

## Theoretical Underpinnings

This research topic was approached from two theoretical frameworks:

(a)New Criticism and
(b)Third-Wave Feminism.

Put simply, New Criticism is a way of analyzing a text on its own merit to discover its underlying, unifying theme. Unlike other schools of literary theory, New Criticism sets aside historical and authorial explanation, focusing objectively on the text at hand to discover a unified whole through its structure, its themes, and its repeated imagery (Bennett, 1992).

Though feminism has been defined in a variety of ways (Snyder, 2008), this research accepts the definition of feminism as a movement concerned with the value of women's equality (Evans, 1994). Feminism has developed over the course of three "waves." The first wave, dating approximately from Mary Wollstonecraft's work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792 to the early 20th century, was concerned with the garnering of basic legal rights for white women, such as the right to own property and the right to vote. The second wave, which spanned from the 1960s to the early 1980s, focused on a wide range of women's societal issues, and saw the beginning of feminist rhetoric centered beyond the needs and goals of white women. The third wave, from the 1980s onward, saw increasing concern for the rights of all women, and sought to complicate and deepen the emphasis of feminism by focusing on diversity and multiplicity (Snyder, 2008).

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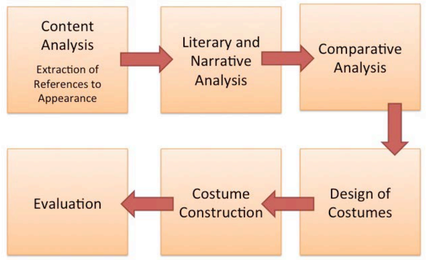
## Methods and Procedures




**Step 1: Content Analysis**
Working independently, data extraction of all appearance-related language was performed by the researcher and advisor, an expert in wearable art and design theory. Verbatim references to appearance, as well as references to appearance that fit along figurative lines, were extracted by both persons. They then met to discuss which of these references could be applied as fitting Hillestad's Model of Appearance. After discussion, intercoder-reliability coefficients were calculated off of the basis of references agreed upon by both the researcher and the advisor. The formula for calculating the reliability coefficient was:

$$r = \frac{\text{agreements} - \text{disagreements}}{\text{agreements}} \times 100$$

With 649 agreements and 84 disagreements, the reliability coefficient was 87%, acceptable according to Saldana (2015). Using two persons to extract appearance references increased the trustworthiness of the research project, opened the auditing process up to more discussion, and allowed more insight into the text.

This research has used the standard set by Hillestad's "The Underlying Structure of Appearance," which defines appearance as being constructed of the specific units of body and dress. In the context of that model, the body includes body forms, body surfaces, body motions, and elements of body expression, while dress includes articles of clothing, articles of adornment, and elements of dress.

**Step 2: Literary and Narrative Analysis**
After auditing and the calculation of reliability, the researcher and advisor met frequently to discuss the dominant themes that emerged from the coding process of the 730 appearance references. This discussion revealed three subordinate themes, namely *Destruction, Beauty Ideals,* and *the Hidden or Transformative Body.* Each theme revealed its own minor themes, with Destruction yielding *Abuse, Physical Disability*, and *the Disappearing Body*, Beauty Ideals suggesting *Fairness* and *Physical Attributes*, and the Hidden or Transformative Body evoking *Disguise* and *Fantasy*.

**Step 3: Comparative Analysis**
Having audited the text and discussed thematic content, the researcher examined costume designs for previous productions of *Romeo and Juliet* through a framework of comparative analysis. As outlined by Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie in his book *The Spiritual Message of Comparative Literature*, comparative analysis "breaks over the walls of linguistic ignorance" by examining international and sometimes extremely differing interpretations of significant shared themes and trends (1913). This comparative analysis enlightened the reviewer as to how some themes, such as *Beauty Ideals*, tend to take the forefront in the vision of many costume designers for this play, while others, such as *Destruction* and *Disguise*, tend to be used less frequently.

**Step 4: Costume Design Illustration**
After the literary, narrative, and comparative analyses have been completed, the researcher designed costumes for a hypothetical production of *Romeo and Juliet*, basing the designs off of the themes extracted from the analysis. To begin the design process, the researcher created a series of quick sketches to reflect on creative meaning and to evaluate design decisions. Eight formal renderings were drawn with Copic marker and adjusted in Adobe Photoshop. These illustrative processes guided how the extracted themes were ultimately visually represented in the costumes of Juliet, Romeo, and Mercutio.

**Step 5: Costume Construction**
Upon the completion of the illustrative process, the researcher constructed doublets for Mercutio and Romeo and a nightgown for Juliet, experimenting with hand sewn apparel construction techniques and employing the technology of digital printing. To construct Juliet's design, the researcher freeform draped the garment and hand stitched much of it directly on the form, using couture sewing techniques, beading, and improvisatory smocking to create twists and pleats that mirrored Juliet's dark and complex language. Romeo's doublet was draped and flat patterned, and used ivory polyester lining, red polyester lining, and an eyelet cotton decorated with sun motifs to convey Romeo's straightforward personality, the foreshadowing of bloody fighting and death in his story arc, and his simple use of language to idealize physical attributes. Mercutio's doublet was developed through Adobe Photoshop CS6 and Optitex PDS, and produced with a Mimaki TX2-1600 digital textile printer; though its construction was similar to Romeo's doublet, the challenges of aligning digitally printed surface designs, along with the design's intention of being demonstrated on twisted pieces of fabric, rendered the construction process of this piece to be the most intense.

**Step 6: Evaluation**
In the final step of the process, the reviewer and advisor reviewed and evaluated all previous steps of the process, drawing conclusions from both the analytical and design processes and preparing a poster upon the topic to present to the reviewer's university. This paper stands as the culmination of this combined research and design process.

## Findings

A categorization of Shakespeare's references to appearances in *Romeo and Juliet* provided an astounding amount of data. Study of the references to appearances extracted revealed that in the course of this play, Shakespeare referred to appearance a grand total of 733 times, with 630 of that number referring to the body and 103 referring to dress. It is worth noting that many of his references to appearance are not literal ones, but are vivid allusions or metaphors that utilize body-coded language. After extraction of the terms, the reviewer and advisor discussed and identified three subordinate themes, namely *Destruction, Beauty Ideals,* and *the Hidden or Transformative Body.* Each theme revealed its own minor themes, with Destruction yielding *Abuse, Physical Disability*, and *the Disappearing Body*, Beauty Ideals suggesting *Fairness* and *Physical Attributes*, and the Hidden or Transformative Body evoking *Disguise* and *Fantasy*. Though some of these themes have been identified by previous researchers (Shapiro, 1964; Hall, 1998), they have never been recognized specifically within the context of appearance.

| Beauty Ideals | Destruction | Hidden or Transforming Body |
|---|---|---|
| Fairness | Abuse | Disguise |
| Physical Attributes | Physical Disability | Fantasy |

**Juliet's Costume**

Juliet is the young romantic heroine of the play, trapped in society's expectations of her as a woman and engaging in a secret affair with Romeo, the enemy of her family. Despite her youth, Juliet demonstrates the darkest language of the play, embodying the theme of Destruction through her willingness to cut Romeo's face out "in little stars" (3.2.24), live among "roaring bears" and "rattling bones" (4.1.80-82), and see her lover "as one dead in the bottom of a tomb" (3.5.33). Juliet is also described by others in the play as a "holy shrine" (1.5.94) and a "rich jewel" (1.5.46), implying that she is perceived as beautiful.

**Romeo's Costume**

The romantic hero, Romeo is young and naïve, largely taking a gentle pacifist role in the feud between the Capulets and Montagues. He is characterized by his obsession with the Beauty Ideals theme, most present in his repeated use of the descriptor "fair" and his constant descriptions of others and himself through terms based in physical attributes. To represent this strand of his personality through design, Romeo's doublet is designed with a "fair" color palette based in ivory cotton eyelet, with red lining showing through only from certain angles. The silhouette of the design is dramatically proportioned, with oversized flanges cutting down to a trim waist, to reference Romeo's extreme idealization of the body's physical attributes and other character's descriptions of him as the epitome of masculine form. Though the overall design is straightforward, representing Romeo's naïve and simplistic approach to the world, surface texture is added through some minor distressing and layering of lining elements.

**Mercutio's Costume**

Mercutio is bright, incredibly intelligent teenage friend of Romeo's, constantly playing with the theme of the Hidden or Transformative Body. Mercutio continually confounds and entrances scholars and audiences alike: his abounding wit and ready humor are crucial to the first half of the show, and his tragic death is the driving force of the second. Though interpretations of him vary, a mainstay of his performance is the element of transformation: Mercutio is constantly dancing on the line between life and death, beauty and ugliness, wit and heart, and any costume design must take this mercurial aspect of his nature into consideration.
To represent Mercutio and the themes of disguise and fantasy, the researcher chose to use a digitally printed motif of a plume of ink in water, developed through Adobe Photoshop CS6 and Optitex PDS and printed with the aid of a Mimaki TX2-1600 digital printer.

## Conclusions and Significance

The results of this research indicate that studying Shakespeare under the lens of appearance is rewarding and informative for both the designer and the researcher; the data reveals new depths to Shakespeare's language and employment of metaphor, while advancing a new interpretation of his characters in the way they use appearance imagery to create complex constructions of self. Besides its contributions to the study of Shakespeare, this research and design process has also exposed a new system of costume design that adopts the literary method of New Criticism and converts it into a system for visual interpretation of texts.

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