Clothes and costumes

Players in Shakespeare's day always dressed in clothes of their own time. The late 1500s was a wonderful time for fashion. Noblemen and women paraded around like peacocks in spectacular outfits that were padded to create startling shapes and slashed to display extra colors and fabrics. There were strict laws about clothes, which were worn as a sign of rank. Nobody below the rank of baron could wear cloth of silver, and people caught dressing above their station could be arrested and locked in the stocks. Players were the only people who were allowed to break these laws, by dressing as nobles on stage.

All Puffed Up

Wealthy women in the late-16th century wore wide dresses with huge, padded sleeves. As a rule, the less practical the outfit, the higher the rank of its wearer. This dress is so impractical that its wearer would have had to go through doors sideways!

Elizabeth Buxton by Robert Peake, c. 1589

Sleeves stuffed with bonnet, or horshands

Fashions for the Stage

Modern productions of Shakespeare's plays use clothes from many different periods of history. These 1920s designs for a production of As You Like It are early-1500s in style. Other productions of the play have been set in Victorian, Elizabethan, or modern times. In Shakespeare's day, the players often dressed extravagantly, which is one reason why people flocked to the playhouses. It wasn't important whether costumes were historically accurate because few people were aware of how fashions had changed throughout history.
ELIZABETHAN EXAGGERATION

Under Queen Elizabeth, the clothes worn by gallants grew more exaggerated. Ruffs, which first appeared in the 1560s, grew larger and larger, while hips and shoulders were padded to make the waist look narrow. Leg coverings often came in three sections - the round trunk hose at the top; the canions going just below the knee; and the nether stockings worn underneath. The aim was to wear as many different fabrics and colors as possible.

LINEN RUFF STIFFENED WITH STARCH
A cartwheel ruff framed the face, making it look as if it were on a plate.

DOUBLET WITH PADDED "PEASCOAT" BELLY

FUNCTIONAL FASHION
Less wealthy men wore more practical versions of the clothes worn by gallants. They used cheaper fabrics such as wool instead of velvet or silk, and might have worn plain knee breeches rather than trunk hose and canions. They wore a ruff but did not worry if it was not the fashionable size.

THE RIGHT SHOES
This carved horn was used by a gallant in the 1590s to help him slip on his shoes. It is engraved with the image of a man of fashion. To a gallant, the right footwear was as important as the right ruff or doublet.

A gallant of the 1590s, when smaller ruffs were back in fashion.