



laboratorio dell'immaginario

issn 1826-6118

rivista elettronica

http://cav.unibg.it/elephant_castle

LINEE DELLA MODA E STILE DELLE ARTI

a cura di Elisabetta De Toni

maggio 2017

CAV - Centro Arti Visive
Università degli Studi di Bergamo

AUDREY TASCHINI

The Christian Believer's Spiritual Clothing in John Donne's Comment of Galatians 3, 27

Several extensive essays have been written concerning the cultural relevance of fashion in Seventeenth-century England (Jones and Stallybrass 2000; Vincent 2003; Edwards 2017), of its importance as a powerful means of expression of one's social and political power, status, condition, role in society. As a matter of fact, as Ann Jones and Peter Stallybrass explain in the introduction to their essay on the subject (Jones and Stallybrass 2000), as the concept of *fashion* modified itself, and started to take up the characteristics of modern fashion, of fashion as we still know it in our contemporary days, clothes grew more and more to be the chosen means of manifesting and representing the self on the one side and of shaping it on the other, *leaving a "print of character" upon observer and wearer alike* (Jones and Stallybrass 2000: 4).

Fully in the ways of Metaphysical poetics, John Donne (Bald 1970; Taschini 2017) uses the worldly and down-to-earth metaphor of clothing, in all its cultural relevance, to convey a spiritual message and the image of the fleeting and ephemeral newly born modern fashion to describe everlasting truths. In his comment to Galatians 3, 27 (Sermon LXXXVII), the metaphor of clothing found in this biblical passage is expanded and dialogues with the fashion culture of his time, a dialogue he skillfully uses to illustrate the very heart and essence of the Christian believer's condition and experience to those hearing the sermon.

Donne takes up the metaphor of clothing right from the begin-

ning his text:

This text is a Reason of a Reason; an Argument of an Argument; The proposition undertaken by the Apostle to prove, is, *That after faith is come, we are no longer under the Schoolmaster, the law.* The reason, by which he proves that, is: *For yee are all the Sonnes of God by faith*, in Christ Jesus; And then the reason of that, is this text, *for all yee that are baptized into Christ, have put on Christ.*

[...]

The *ludiciall* law of Moses, was certainly the most absolute, and perfect law of government, which could have been given to *that people*, for whom it was given; but yet to thinke, that all *States* are bound to observe those lawes, because God gave them, hath no more ground, then that all Men are bound to goe clothed in *beasts skinnes*, because God apparelled *Adam*, and *Eve* in that fashion (Donne 1839: 102-119).

The term *fashion* can be interpreted here in accordance to its modern connotations, indicating the impermanent status of something that is valid and good for one specific time only. As God's decision to clothe Adam and Eve in animal skins had a specific reason and signification for that time, but not for subsequent periods, so the Mosaic Law was good and perfect for the people of God in the times of the Old Testament, but was destined to be replaced with a higher order still, so that after the coming of Christ believers were no longer bound by that law.

To illustrate the metaphor of the spiritual garment of the Christian believer, Donne focuses his attention on a specific word of the Bible verse and on the meaning of the term "to cover", in the Latin Vulgate *induere*:

Induere, is to cover so far, as that Covering can reach; A hat covers the head; a glove the hand; and other garments, more; But Christ, when he is put on, Covers us all. If we have *weake heads*, shallow brains, either a *silence*, and a reservednes, which make the foole and the wise equall, or the good interpretation of friends, which put *good Constructions* upon all that we say, or the dignity of *autority*, and some

great place, which we hold, which puts an opinion in the people, that we are wise, or else we had never been brought thither; these cover our heads, and hide any defect in them. If we have foule hands, we can cover them, with excuses; If they be foule with *usurious Extortion*, we can put on a glove, an excuse, and say, He that borrowed my money, got more by it, then I that lent it; If, with *bribery in an office*, we can cover it and say, He that knew, that I bought my office, will be content to let me be a saver by it; If our hands be foule with *shedding of innocent bloud*, as *Saint Hierome* sayes that *Adam* eate the *Apple*, *Ne contristaretur Delicias suas*, left he should over grieve his wife, by refusing it, *Ne contristaremur Delicias nostras*, either because we would not displease another; or because our *beloved sinne*, to which we had married our selves, did sollicite us to it. Particular excuses cover our particular defects, from the sight of men, but to put on Christ, covers us all over; even from the *sight of God* himselfe. So that how narrowly so ever he search into us, he sees nothing but the whitenesse of his Sonnes innocency, and the rednesse of his Sonnes bloud (Donne 1839).

In this passage, an abrupt shift from biblical narration to everyday life and from the language of theology to the common language of clothing and body parts can be noticed. The human body is represented in this text as shattered in fragments: each fragment is a part of the human body and each body part Donne associates to a particular sin to be covered, metaphorically, with the appropriate piece of clothing. Far from being symbols of style and refinement, as Seventeenth-century society considered them, Donne represents clothes and accessories as the exact opposite, as the symbol and the symptom of the fallen nature of man. As in the narration of Genesis, in which, after the fall from grace to sin, garments and covering up became a necessity, in this passage clothes are seen as a means of covering mankind's sin, as an attempt to hide it from the eyes of others and, in vain, from the sight of God. Material clothing, Donne argues, can only partially and materially cover man's sins, reaffirming his fallen condition, but the through the supernatural garment of Christ man can be covered in all his being, both spiritual and material, his sins disappear

ing under a cloak of perfect purity even to the eyes of God. But *putting on Christ*, continues Donne, does even more for the Christian believer:

When the prodigall child returned to his father; his father clothed him intirely, and all at once; he put a *robe* upon him, to cover all his defects: which Robe, when God puts upon us, in clothing us with Christ, that robe is not onely *Dignitas quam perdidit Adam*, as *Augustine* says, but it is *Amicus sapientiae*, as *Ambrase* enlarges it, It does not onely make us aswell, as we were in *Adam*, but it enables us better, to preserve that state; It does not onely *cover us*, that is, make us excusable, for our past, and present sinnes, but it indues us with *grace*; and *wisdome* to keep that robe still, and never to returne to our former foulnesses, and deformities (Donne 1839).

The garment of Christ, unlike human clothes, is not merely a beautiful, yet superficial, mask covering man's sin. On the contrary, quoting Augustine, Donne describes it as nothing less than the restoration of the dignity that was lost by man through the fall. Human clothes may alter a man's outer appearance, yet *putting on Christ* is described by Donne as an experience that has the power to completely change one's inner being. But the sinner, like the prodigal son, whom God clothes with Christ is not only given back the dignity and wholeness that he enjoyed before the fall, but is also infused once more with the gift of grace, a gift that grants him the wisdom and strength in order to resist the world's ugliness and deformity and preserve the beauty of his spiritual garment. The regenerative power of grace, explains Donne, operates beyond man's limited self-knowledge and understanding of his own sinfulness:

Our first parents *Adam* and *Eve* were naked all over; but they were not sensible of *all* their nakednesse, but onely of those parts whereof they were *ashamed*. Nothing but the shame of the world makes us discern our deformities; And onely for those faults, which shame makes us take knowledge of, we goe about to provide; And we pro-

vide nothing but *short Aprons*, as that word signified; and those but of *fig-leaves*; That which comes first to hand, and that which is withered before it is made, that doe we take for an excuse, for an aversion of our owne conscience, when she begins to cast an eye, or to examine the nakednesse, and deformities of our soules.

But when God came to cloath them, their short *aprons* were extended to *coates*, that covered them all over, and their *fig-leaves* to strong *skins*; for God saw that not onely those parts, of which they were already ashamed, needed covering, but that in all their other parts, if they continued, naked, and still exposed to the Injurie, and violence of the weather, they would contract diseases, and infirmities; and therefore God covers them so thoroughly, as he doth not onely provide for reparation of former inconveniences, but prepare against future.

And so perfect effects doth this garment, *Christ Iesus*, work upon us, if we put him on; He doth not onely cover *Originall sinnes*, (which is the effect of those disobedient Members, which derive sinne, upon us, in the sinfull generation of our parents) but he covers all our *actuell sinnes*, which we multiplie every day; and not onely those, which the world makes us *ashamed of*, but which we hide from the world; yea which we hide from our selves; that is, sinnes, which by a long custome of practise, we commit so habitually, and so indifferently, as that we have forgot, that they are sinnes (Donne 1839).

Corrupted by the ways of the world, men can only partially recognize, if at all, their own sins and the means they use to hide from the judgment of their conscience the sin they do recognize is weak, ephemeral and ineffective. The garments they, in their fallen condition, select for themselves in order to cover the wounds of sin, are limited and leave their wearers exposed to the deadly attacks of further sin. Only grace can come to mankind's assistance, covering one's being in its wholeness and providing protection from the unknown wounds that can be found in each man's soul and even from the sins that each man hides from his own self. The supernatural garment of grace can accomplish a complete transfiguration of man's life, but not against man's own will:

But as it was in *Adams Clothing* there, so must it be in our spirituall putting on of Christ. The word used there, *Labash*, doth not signifie that God cloathed *Adam*, nor that *Adam* cloathed himselfe; but as the *Grammarians* call it, it is in *Hiphil*, and it signified *Induere fecit eos*; God caused them to be cloathed, or God caused them to cloath themselves; which is also intimated, nay evidently expressed in the words of this text; we are our selves poore, and impotent creatures, we cannot make our selves ready; we are poore and beggerly creatures, we have nothing to put on; Christ is that garment; and then Christ is the very life, by which we stretch out our armes and our legs, to put on that garment; yea he puts it on upon us, he doth the whole worke: but yet he doth not thrust it on: He makes us *Able* to put it on: but if we be not *willing*, then he puts *no necessity upon our will*: but we remaine naked still (Donne 1839).

Left to his own devices, with his strength alone, man would find himself in a miserable condition, helpless and naked, but if he is willing in his heart to receive the divine gift of grace he allows Christ to bestow His qualities upon him and to transfigure his life so that it mirrors His perfect, spiritual beauty. It is by God's grace alone that man may put on robes of purity and virtue: God himself, in Christ, becomes both the perfect garment of light that clothes believer and the strength necessary to put it on and keep it on.

Once again turning to the metaphor of modern fashion, Donne procedes in his sermon illustrating the spiritual *habitus* of the Christian believer:

There is a degree of vanity, and pride, whereby some Men delight to weare their richest clothes innermost, and most out of sight; But in this double garment of a Christian, it is necessarily so; for *faith* is the richest, and most precious part of this garment; an this, which is our *Holy-day garment*, is worne innermost; for that (our faith) is onely seen by God; but our outward garment, of *workes*, which is our *worky-day garment*, that is our *sanctification* is seen of all the world. And that also must be put on, or else we have not put on *Christ*: and it must cover us *all over*; that is, our sanctification must goe through

our *whole life* in a constant, and an even perseverance; we must not onely be *Hospitale*, and feed the poore at Christmas, be sober, and abstinent, the day that we *receive*, repent, and thinke of amendment of life, in the day of visitation, and *sickness*; but as the garment, which Christ wore, was *seamlesse*, and intire, so this garment, which is *Christ Iesus*, that is, our sanctification, should be intire, and uninterrupted, in the whole course of our lives, we must remember, that at the Mariage which figured the kingdome of heaven, the master of the feast reprehended, and punished him, that was come in, not expressly because he had not a *wedding garment*, but *Quomodo intrasti*, says he, *how camest thou in not having on thy wedding garment?* So that (if it could be possible) though we had put on the inside of this garment, which is *Christ*, that is, if we had *faith*, yet if we have not the outside too, that is *sanctification*, we have not put on Christ, as we should; for this is *Indui virtute ex alto*; to have both inside, *faith*, and outside, *sanctification*: and to put it on so, that it may cover us all over; that is all our life; because it is not in our power, if we put it off, by *new sinnes*, to put it on againe, when we will. *I have put off my coate, how shall I put it on*, was the doubt of the spouse, in the Canticles, even when Christ had called her: So hard a thing is it, if we de-vest the righteousnesse of Christ, after we have put it on, to cloth our selves againe in that garment.

As then this word, *Induere*, to put on, to be clothed, signifies a largenesse, and an abundance, according to that, *The pastures are clothed with sheep, and the vallies with corne*: So is this garment, Christ Iesus, such a garment, as is alone so all sufficient, as that if we doe put on that, we need no other; *Put yee on the Lord Iesus Christ, and take no thought for the flesh*; if ye have put on that, you are clothed, and armed, and adorned sufficiently (Donne 1839).

Here Donne represents the life of the Christian believer, both spiritual and material, once again using the metaphor of clothing. The garments man wears are described as an integral part of his being; they are the *habitus* permeating every level of his existence, emotional, mental and practical, from the most intimate aspects to the most exterior. In this passage, we can once more notice how in his sermon Donne reverses the order of importance of body and clothing: the human body with its fleshly desires becomes the

unnecessary element that man must take off whereas the garment that is Christ becomes that which is “sufficient”, the true and complete essence of the individual:

In the first creation, in the *Faciamus hominem ad Imaginem nostrum*, when God seems to have held a consultation about the making of Man, man put on all the Trinity, *all God*; & in the redemption God put on *all Man*; not onely all the nature of Mankind in generall, but in particular, *every Man*. But as the spirit of God, is said to have put on a particular Man, *Spiritus Domini induit Gedeon, the spirit of the Lord, clothed, or put on Gedeon*, when he selected him for his service, so must the spirit of every particular Man, put on Christ, he must not be content, to be under the *generall cover*, (either under his general providence, because he is a *Creature*, or a member of his Mystically body, because he adheres to a visible *Church*) he must not say, I am as warm clothed, as another, I have as much of Christ in me, as a great many, that doe well enough in the world, but he must so in-wrap himselfe in Christ, and in his Merits, as to make *all that* to be his owne. No man may take the frame of Christs merit in peeces; no Man may take his forty days *fasting* and put on that, and say, Christ hath fasted for me, and therefore I may surfeit; No man may take his *Agony*, and pensiveness, and put on that, and say, Christ hath *been sad* for me, and therefore I may be merry. He that puts on Christ, must put him on *all*; and not onely find, that Christ hath dyed, nor onely that he hath died for *him*, but that he also hath died *in Christ*, and that whatsoever Christ suffered, *he suffered in Christ* (Donne 1839).

By putting on Christ, Donne explains, it is no longer man wearing the garment but rather it is the garment that becomes the active part; wearing Christ means becoming one with Him, one with His innocence before the eyes of God, one with his life, one His death, it means becoming his province in the exile of this world. It means realizing and accepting the gift of salvation in our own, personal life-experience:

For, as Christs merit, and satisfaction, is not too narrow for all the

world, so is it not too large for any one Man; Infinite worlds might have been saved by it, if infinite worlds had been created; And, if there were no more Names in the book of life, but thine, all the Merit of Christ were but enough to save thy one sinfull soule, which could not have been redeemed, though alone, at any lesse price, then his death.

All that Christ did, and suffered, he did and suffered for *thee, as thee*; not onely *as Man*, but as that particular Man, which bears such, or such a name; and rather, then any of those, whom he loves, should appeare naked before his Father; and so discover to his confusion, those scarres, and deformities, which his sinnes have imprinted upon him, (as his love is devoutly, and piously extended by the Schooles and some contemplative Men) Christ would be content to doe, and suffer, as much as he hath done, for any one particular Man yet: But beyond *Infinite*, there is no degree: and his merit was infinite, both because an infinite Majesty resided in his person, and because an infinite Majesty accepted his sacrifice for infinite (Donne 1839).

Saved by his innate condition of nakedness, man is clothed by God with the new, pure essence of His Son, making him, in his turn, a son as well:

But this act of Christ, this redemption makes us onely *servants*; *servi à servando*, we are servants to him, that preserved, and saved us, is the derivation of the *Law*. But the *application* of this redemption (which is the *putting on of Christ*;) makes us *sons*; for we are not to put on Christ, onely as a *Livery*, to be distinguished by externall marks of *Christianity*; but so, as the sonne puts on his father; that we may be of the same nature and substance as he; and that God may be in us, *Non tanquam in denario*, not as the King is in a peece of coine, or a medall, but *tanquam in filio*, as he is in his sonne, in whom the same nature both humane, and Royall doth reside (Donne 1839).

The fact of wearing the garment of Christ, as that of being a son of God, is not an exterior decoration, but, on the contrary, it signifies becoming one with God Himself as the Son is one with the Father. Likewise, God is not within the heart of the believer as a

detached image of Himself, but he is truly and fully part of his very being. The change of clothes is a change of essence:

Now when we goe about earnestly to make our selves *Temples*, and *Altars*, and to dedicate our selves to God, we must change our clothes; As when God bad *Iacob*, to goe up to *Bethel*, to make an *Altar*, he commanded all his family to *change their clothes*; In which work, we have two things, to doe; first, we must put off those clothes which we had; and appeare *naked* before God, without presenting any thing of our owne; (for when the Spirit of God came upon *Saul*, and that he prophecied, his first act was, to *strip himselfe naked*: And then secondly, we come to our transfiguration, and to have those garments of Christ communicated to us which were *as white, as the light*; and we shall be admitted into that little number, of which it is said, *Thou hast a few Namees in Sardis, which have not defiled their garments, and they shall walke with me in white*.

And from this (which is *Induere vestem*;) from this putting on Christ as a garment, we shall grow up to that perfection, as that we shall *Induere personam*, put on *him*, his person; That is, we shall so appeare before the Father; as that he shall take us for his owne Christ; we shall beare his name and person; and we shall every one be so accepted, as if every one of us were *all Mankind*; yea, as if we were *he* himselfe. He shall find in all our bodies his *woundes*, in all our mindes, his *Agonies*; in all our hearts, and actions his *obedience*. And as he shall doe this by imputation, so really in all our *Agonies*, he shall send his Angels to minister unto us, as he did to *Elias*; In all our tentations he shall furnish us with his Scriptures to confound the Tempter; as he in person, did in his tentation, and in our heaviest tribulation, which may extort from us the voice of diffidence, *My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?* He shall give us the assurance to say, *In manus tuas &c. Into thy hands O Lord have I commended my spirit*, and there I am safe; He shall use us in all things, as his sonne; and we shall find restored in us, the Image of the whole Trinity, imprinted at our creation; for by this Regeneration, we are adopted by the Father in the bloud of the Sonne by the sanctification of the holy Ghost (Donne 1839).

By putting on the garment of Christ and becoming one with Him the believer becomes part of His person, he shares His agonies,

His struggles, but is also enlivened by His strength and wisdom; he becomes a fit instrument of God, His hand and His action in the world.

...

In his sermon, Donne traces a parallel between the symbolic value of clothes in Seventeenth-century English society and the religious experience of conversion, of the spiritual event of *putting on Christ*, using the symbolism and the language of the former as a means to illustrate some of the most fundamental truths of the Christian doctrine and the heart of the Christian believer's faith. The extensive use of this metaphor throughout the text is expressive of the considerable cultural weight of the reflection of the time upon clothing and fashion and identity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BALD R. C. (1970), *John Donne: A Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

DONNE J. (1839), *The Works of John Donne I-VI*, ed. by H. Alford, John W. Parker, London, Vol. 4, Sermon LXXXVII, pp. 102-119.

EDWARDS L. (2017), *How to Read a Dress, A Guide to Changing Fashion from the 16th to the 20th Century*, Bloomsbury Academic, London.

JONES A. R. - STALLYBRASS P. (2000), *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

TASCHINI A. (2017), *From Vanitas to Veritas. John Donne and the Journey of the Soul*, Mimesis international, Milano.

VINCENT S. (2003), *Dressing the Elite: Clothes in Early Modern England*, Bloomsbury Academic, Berg, London.