

The Emperor's New Clothes

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This is no doubt one of the most enjoyable stories in Anderson's collection – brief, uncomplicated, hilarious. It's only recently that I began to have doubts about its purported significance. Let us begin by reminding ourselves of the salient features of the tale.

There is an emperor obsessed with fine clothes. He is always ordering new ones and trying them on. Enter two 'cheats' who claim that they can weave the finest of fabrics, invisible to all save idiots and people undeserving of their position. The emperor must have clothes of this extraordinary material for a grand procession of state that is coming up shortly and provides the so-called artisans with all the money and gold and fine silk

they want, as well as a studio where they may work undisturbed. They only pretend to work; their looms are bare, their shuttles weave air, their scissors snip but cut nothing, their needles don't stitch anything. Courtiers sent to review progress stare pop-eyed but dare not say they see nothing, lest they be sacked; and nod enthusiastically as the 'artisans' point at the gorgeous designs they have created. The emperor comes for a final inspection and behaves the same way. Before the procession he strips to the buff and is helped into his new finery, complete with an extra-long train. He steps out, followed by courtiers pretending to hold the train, to loud acclaim from the crowds for none wishes to be taken for an idiot. Only a child says out loud that the emperor

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is naked; the populace breaks into murmurs of assent. The emperor shivers in embarrassment but having come this far cannot give up the pretence and carries on.

Now for the critical examination. We can take the setting to be Anderson's homeland, Denmark. The season is not mentioned but let us assume it's summer when the weather is most equable. Summer temperatures at Elsinore, most famous of Denmark's royal castles, vary from lows of 11 and highs of 21 degrees Celsius. Would even the most eccentric of European emperors wear *only* clothes of extremely diaphanous material in such weather? True, Dacca muslin enjoyed as much of a cachet among the royalty and aristocracy in Europe as it did in the East. But it was worn never by itself; and always over other items of relatively heavy stuff: bodices and petticoats among ladies, trousers and coats for men. I will spare you an elaborate description and refer you to Google Images.

It should be obvious that the emperor at Elsinore or wherever else in Anderson's Scandinavia could not have wished to parade in clothes made solely of material finer – let us say – than the finest of Dacca gauzes, even if it was summer. We must therefore rescind the suspension of disbelief that we have so long willingly accorded this tale.

After such deconstruction what can we retrieve from the absurd royal parade? There is nothing to retrieve but we can reconstruct the true story that has been disguised by the totally unacceptable fabrication.

The emperor, we are told, is inordinately fond of finery. We detect here the all-too-common phenomenon of displacement. It is not fine clothes he craves but refinement – cultural, aesthetic, spiritual. It is said he neglects his worldly duties and spends long hours prinking before the mirror. Is he a courtesan? What a caricature! Mirror gazing can only be a metaphor for introspection. The emperor tries to plumb the depths of his soul. He meditates.

At this point come the two so-called cheats. Who are they, where have they come

