



# Renaissance Impostors and Proofs of Identity

*Miriam Eliav-Feldon*

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## **Renaissance Impostors and Proofs of Identity** Miriam Eliav-Feldon

Early Modern Europe was an "Age of Impostors". Religious dissimulation was rife not only in Iberia with its crypto-Jews and crypto-Muslims, but also, following the Reformation, wherever non-conformists had to conceal their beliefs. Geographical expansion offered various opportunities for forging new identities – as envoys of imaginary princes or as cross-dressers living for years as members of the opposite sex. Satan was believed to be turning old ladies into his minions. Vagrants transformed themselves into the "deserving poor". Gypsies travelled under various false pretences. All these identity deceptions increased manifold the authorities' fear that things were not what they seemed, and sparked a frantic search for reliable means of identification. Offenders of all kinds were branded; sumptuary legislation was intended to create a clearly visible social hierarchy; and vast bureaucratic machineries were erected to investigate identities, issue licenses and control movement.

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