



‘Strange Habits’

Clothes, Climes, and the Environment in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries

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Women’s Work: Embroidery as a Vehicle for Shaping Identity and Environment

In conversation with the conference’s theme, I examine the role of embroidery in Elizabethan England as it relates to class and the policing of women’s sexuality, free time, and economic participation. Although society promoted embroidery as a way to occupy women’s free time and stave off potentially eroticized idleness, the possibility of artistic expression, personal profit, and even social notoriety allowed women to subvert the dominant social order, lending them agency. For context, I investigate Shakespearean insults like “flax wench” and what the phrase reveals about women’s work and sexuality; spinning flax, spinning thread, and embroidery were fraught with messages about women’s virtue and social roles. Drawing upon the work of Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, I argue that the act of decorating cloth with embroidery instead of spinning thread destabilized traditional gender roles. Where men were expected to actively participate in the public sphere, women were supposed to tend to the home. When women embroidered fabric instead of spinning thread, they were engaging in a creative practice, and by participating in markets and artistic self-display were beginning to interact with the public in a way that was viewed as potentially dangerous. Decorating cloth with needlework and putting this work on display came to be considered unladylike, immodest, and contrary to society’s insistence that women should focus on practicing piety and humility. But how did Elizabethan women themselves experience embroidery? I examine Karen Lyon’s work about women’s roles in creating cultural memory through working with fabric, and look at recurring motifs in embroidery samplers circulating among women, elaborating upon Maura Tournoff’s insights about how specific stitches and ubiquitous fertile vine patterns had associations with the natural world and fertility. To conclude, I examine how women continually shaped environments that expressed their identities and challenged dominant social order through embroidery.