



# ‘Strange Habits’

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

International Conference / 3-5 December 2020 / Clermont-Ferrand, Moulins

**BENDER, DANIEL (Pace University, NY)**

[dbender@pace.edu](mailto:dbender@pace.edu)

### **The Victors’ Secret: Silk Versus Wool in *Henry VI 2***

Two economies clash in *Henry VI*: the local economy of small producers take up arms against the wealthy and privileged Lords of the Realm. The “handicraft” men, as they name themselves, are proud of producing material goods not only with their own hands, but on their own lands. Above all, this local production and economic self-sufficiency determines what may be called the couture of the patriotic. Wool and linen could be produced in England, carded or spun in England, and tailored into blouses, vests, and coats.

This home-grown economy, could, however, suffer damage from the elite class who crave far more elegant and sensuous apparel abroad. When the Lords of England enter the stage of Henry VI, they are denounced in part for choosing a global economy of clothing.

As Jack Cade, working class rebel who claims royal lineage exclaims, the Lords who oppose him are “silken-coated slaves,” who turn against warm, practical clothing made by the local economy. But Cade is missing out on the secret pleasures of silk, which consists of signalling economic privilege, to be sure, but carries the hidden eroticism of a new species, the angelic.

Those who can afford imported clothes send money out of England and into the coffers of large-scale holding companies. Orders for silk would be placed with an importer who buys the precious and sensuous material from warm-weather climates. This makes silk the fashion or even the flag of class warfare. But there is another desire driving the turn from home-made garments to the silk imported from foreign lands, one that the farmers and agricultural workers of England depicted in *Henry VI* leave unspoken, Silk is by its very silkiness a material that generates pleasure, being a sexualized rendition of cloth. This sexualization of cloth occurs when the exotic smoothness of the silk manages to deliver an ideal version of sexuality: Ordinary humans, hairy and clad in the sheared coats of sheep, are the epitome of mammals. The mammal with higher order skills—the humans—must rely on the protective covering of another mammal, a form of couture that satirizes the Barthian concept of couture. By contrast, Silk embodies the erotic semantics of “la peau douce”—the soft skin that, devoid of hair or fur or calloused texture, combines the sensuality of a higher order figure. One who wears silk gains the illusion of post-mammalian transcendence, perhaps belonging to the angelic orders of seraphim and cherubim and their perfected beauty.

When Jack Cade brands the lords silken-coated slaves, Shakespeare offers a startling proleptic hint of what the post-modern world now sees: the epochal transformation of local economies into global economies: For the wealthy, money can bring the exotic and angelic fabric of warm climates into cold England. Although Shakespeare depicts the working class as bumbling reformers who deserve to be laughed at, the collapse of local economy and working-class pride is tragically forecast in Cade’s deployment of *gilets-jaune* epithets against ruling elite classes and a fashion economy based on erotic thrill.