



# ‘Strange Habits’

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

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### **Fabrics, Fashion and the Environment: Representing Venice in Early Modern England**

This paper investigates the way Venetian clothes and attires are represented in early modern literature and to what extent they shed light on the geographical and cultural environment of the city. At the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Cesare Vecellio’s illustrated book (*Habiti antichi*) associated parts of the world with costumes as well as material signifiers and provided a well-documented section on Venice. The link between dress and regional specificity was however already hinted at in Andrew Boorde’s *First Book of The Introduction of Knowledge* in the 1540’s with Venice being characterized by the wealthy apparel of its inhabitants. While the magnifico’s gowns with long wide sleeves were suggestive of the political environment and the stability of the Commonwealth, the courtesans were associated with the high platform shoes known as chopines, whose first function was to be protected from the damp climate of the city. In *Othello*, the Venetian milieu is both represented as “a fertile climate” and as a place where Bianca the courtesan is defined through her ability to “buy herself bread and clothes”. Interestingly, the linguistic shift of the word “venetian” from an adjective to a noun category testifies to the City’s influence as regards fashion. The vogue for “venetians”, referring to a specific style of breeches became highly popular in the 1580’s in England. Focusing on links between cultural and literary material, I’ll look at the way Venetian strange habits were made familiar by early modern authors, how they serve an anthropological and sociological purpose, an encomiastic function or rather a satirical discourse.