



# ‘Strange Habits’

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

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### **Flowers and Needles: Emilia’s Skirt**

In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, the heroine Emilia asks her waiting-woman to make her a skirt embroidered with narcissi, because she is walking in a garden where they grow. This is part of the play’s general interest in flowers: its first word is ‘Roses’, the first two stanzas are descriptions of flowers, and Emilia says ‘Of all flowers / Methinks a rose is best’ (2.2.135-6) because ‘It is the very emblem of a maid’ (2.2.137); at the end of the play it does indeed become the emblem of Emilia herself when she reads the fall of a single rose as a sign that she will be married, and Palamon, the lover who finally wins her, tells Venus he is ‘thy vowed soldier, who do bear thy yoke / As ’twere a wreath of roses’ (5.1.95-6). However the roses are real, while Emilia is interested not just in narcissi in general but specifically *stitched* narcissi. Flowers and needlework are connected again in the figure of the Jailer’s Daughter: once she goes mad, she sings about flowers and the Doctor advises the Wooer to court her with flowers, but before then she too thinks about sewing as she looks at ‘The little stars and all, that look like aglets’ (3.4.2), that is decorative fastenings, and vows, ‘For I’ll cut my green coat, a foot above my knee’ (3.4.19). Both Emilia and the Jailer’s Daughter see a relationship between what they wear and where they are: Emilia wants a skirt that echoes what she sees in the garden, the Jailer’s Daughter thinks of the stars as parts of a garment. This paper will explore some of the ways in which the apparently everyday act of a woman stitching a flower can serve to link to her environment.