



‘Strange Habits’

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

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Changing Habits: The Politics and Theatricality of Clothing in Early Modern Voyages to the Arctic

When twelve Dutchmen, out of the seventeen who had set out on a voyage in search of the North-East passage a year and a half before, reappeared in Amsterdam on November 1, 1597, they offered a striking sight: not only because their fellow citizens thought they had been ‘long before [...] dead and rotten’ but also because of their strange accoutrement, clad as they were in "the same clothes that [they] wore in Nova Zembla with [their] caps furred with white foxes skin" (Phillip, 1609 sig. X3v). They were immediately introduced to Prince Maurice and the Ambassador of Denmark in their Russian outfits. The scene, which provides a fit finale to the exciting tale of the Dutchmen’s adventures in the Arctic (De Veer, 1598) highlights the political and dramatic function of dress and attire in the travels that Europeans undertook in what has been called the ‘age of exploration’. Clothing, and the need to find new markets, is often the economic rationale behind overseas exploration but it also plays a crucial role in the organization and circumstances of the voyages themselves, whether it be the local (and often ill-suited) garb of the travellers, or the foreign and often exotic outfits of the country people they encountered. Rather than turn our attention to the "naked savages" that John Smith and others described in Virginia or Florida, we will turn to the Northern climes and examine European encounters with ‘people of Cathay’ (Frobisher, Davis, Hakluyt) - Inuit and also ‘frozen Muscovites’ (*Love’s Labours’ Lost*, V.2). Scenes of travellers and strangers changing habits (European travellers going native or conversely country people, often forcibly, dressed up in a European fashion) changed the early modern visual culture. A closer look at the theatricality of such moments shows that beyond the generic conventions of travel writing, clothing in this case questioned technology and redefined the winter landscape, as well as a general sense of place.